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# The Journey That Led Me to Becoming a Critical Social Justice Educator

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The Journey That Led Me to Becoming a Critical Social Justice Educator

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### **Abstract**

Within this ethnographic narrative, the works of several theorists who discuss the importance of Critical Social Justice and its effect on students within the classroom will be discussed and put to practice. Beginning May 2019 and carrying through July of 2020, I held these theories closely as they helped pave the way of my first year as a teacher of record, and have since shaped me into the woman I recognize myself as today. Within this document, you will read about the expectations I held myself subject to before going into the classroom, case studies of three students whom I had the honor of working alongside, and a final reflection of how I developed over the course of this year. This experience has been pivotal, and I can confidently say that I have acquired the implications Critical Social Justice transpires, as it caters to the well-being and positive learning experience every student deserves.

## **Preface**

The past 14 months have been spent accumulating written practices and applying them in my classroom firsthand. With three focus students at the forefront of my mind, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of getting to know my students beyond the classroom. My work with my three focus students (the majority of what is written within this ethnography) transferred to my daily practices with all my students. I learned the importance of Social Emotional Learning and how student voice should carry heavily in the classroom. Thankfully I acquired this skillset within the first half of the school year, as I was able to take these practices as we abruptly transition into Online Learning.

The year of which my first year of teaching took place, correlates to the 2020 Global Pandemic, where millions across the globe have sheltered at home to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 Virus. As a result, school closures were mandatory, and classes were asked to enact various methods for the remainder of the school year. Fortunately for my situation, I had the opportunity to continue teaching virtually through the online platform, Zoom.

Within this ethnography, I will not only discuss various strategies I felt communicated best for my students' success but how these methods allowed my professional and personal growth. The work of a Critical Social Justice Educator is never-ending, and I recognize that this is just the beginning. However, I am looking forward to further developing strategies and practices to provide my students with an equitable and just academic environment.

Read critically but with patience, as I acknowledge the growth between where I began in May of 2019 and where I see myself now in July of 2020.

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### **Part A: Teaching Through a Social Justice Lens**

Where we come from matters. My family has instilled many qualities into my being, some cultural others not, but they are my base, my foundation, and reason for success. Throughout my educational career, I have been exposed to many different situations that have made me think twice and reflect on my purpose. I have gone through experiences in life that have influenced where I am today and why I am chasing what I am. The right to equal educational opportunity is deserving of all; not just those who happen to be born into the right circumstances. There should be no criteria or bar to meet, to be given proper aid, instruction, and fundamentals for youth entering academia, yet a gap exists and continues to deepen as time goes on. I believe that everyone is born to succeed, and if given proper environment to thrive within, “all our dreams can come true if we have the courage to pursue them” (Walt Disney, 1943).

#### **Journey to Teaching**

##### **My Positionality**

I grew up within a family of five; my mother, father, and two older brothers. My father, Alex, was born in Santiago, Chile, and came to the United States through adoption with his older brother at the age of one and three. My mother, Yvonne, was born in Los Angeles, California where she was raised by my grandmother who actively practices traditional Mexican culture. Growing up, my brothers and I were raised under my mother’s cultural influence except for the incorporation of learning Spanish. Due to my father’s upbringing, his Spanish related experiences did not tie equally to positive interactions. Though times may have changed, he did not want to expose any negative affiliation of the language with his children; resulting in the dismissal of learning and practicing Spanish within the household. Though my comprehension of

Spanish is strong, my brothers and I were raised speaking only English until our later childhood years.

Both my mother and father are independent, hard workers. Before having her children, my mother was a businesswoman working closely with prominent figures and climbing the social ladder. My father became a firefighter and later promoted to Captain for the Los Angeles City Fire Department where he has now worked for the last 33 years. When my mother became pregnant with my oldest brother, they moved to Upland, California to the house we have now lived for the last 30 years. Now a stay-at-home mom, our family of five was considered middle class due to our location and my father's occupation. Little did I know this status was the beginning of my academic career. My brothers and I were placed in our local public school and participated in a plethora of sports and music-based activities which have significant importance still to this day. Being fully occupied and engaged, we excelled in school until our world turned upside-down in 2005 when my parents finalized their divorce. Being only nine years old, I didn't know how to process this change and do not believe I would have been able to without the support of my brothers. During this alteration, my brothers and I remained in full contact with our father while my mother held custody of the three of us. Their arrangement granted my mother ownership of the home however recognizing our physical placement did not change, it seemed that everything else around us had.

Though no family is perfect, I can say with complete confidence that it is because of the love, support, and motivation they surrounded me with, that allowed me to grow into the woman I am today. Ever since I can remember, I have looked up to the sheer determination of both of my parents in their careers and everyday life. Because being a fireman calls for days away from home, I learned at a young age even before the divorce, to not translate his absence as

nonexistence and neglect, but as love and admiration. I soon understood his job and the sacrifices he'd have to make to fulfill his obligation as both a firefighter and a father. In turn, his persistence taught me about the power of love through distance, and most importantly about the courage, compassion, and determination one must have to provide safety and protection for others. Comparably, though my mother did not have as much of a physically demanding career as my father, her devotion, loyalty, and passion in her line of work and with keeping her family whole was equally transparent. With both of my parents' admirable characteristics, my brothers and I were given a great path to follow that would help lead to our successes in life. My older brother is now working alongside our father as a firefighter for the Los Angeles City Fire Department, and my oldest brother is a Marine for the United States Marine Corps. It is now my turn to follow in their honorable footsteps as I swell with an aspiration to fulfill my desire of becoming a teacher for the youth of today and future leaders of tomorrow.

### **My Decision to Be a Teacher**

Growing up, I was fortunate enough to have been placed in extracurricular activities that ranged from after school team sports to solo pursuits through martial arts and music. I first realized I wanted to work with children at the age of eight while in a rehearsal for a production my music studio was holding. To my recollection, the number we were rehearsing was for a combined group formed of both the older and younger singers. I can't remember exactly what I did, but during a break, my actions produced a quote I will never forget. An older girl turned to her friend, pointed at me, and smiled as she uttered the words, "she is going to be such a great mom one day". Though I don't remember the context that provoked those words to be said, they have rung loud and clear in my head ever since. Despite it being a friendly testimony of one, from that moment on I was convinced and knew I was destined to work with children.



As time proceeded, however, I became very involved and intrigued by vocal technique and ability. A majority of my teenage years I spent focused on my education, all while engulfed by vocal recitals and competitions in and outside of my high school, Orange County School of the Arts. Because of the 14 hour-long days that were composed of AP classes and after school conservatory, my vision of becoming a grade schoolteacher became blurred by the abundance of activity and responsibility I took on. Upon high school graduation, I ignored my initial intuition, and instead strove to make my teenaged dream of becoming a famous singer come to fruition. Acknowledging that my chances of success in this field weren't high, I took the safer path by pursuing higher education and majored in Business Management at San Francisco State University. I hoped to actively practice my passion while also gaining the knowledge that would inevitably aid my vocal pursuit in the industry. It was during this journey however where I acquired a position as a Corps Member for the non-profit organization, Jumpstart, and implemented a curriculum that supports children's language, literacy, and social-emotional development ("Our Work," 2019, para. 1). Not only did this experience expose me to novel learning opportunities and professional growth but it also gave me an eye-opening realization that I did not have to become an entrepreneur to be a leader of change. I could instead express my passion for working with children and become a transformative educator who promotes quality learning for all, including those of diverse backgrounds and located in under-resourced communities ("About Us," 2019, para. 3). It is this experience primarily that I attribute what fueled me in acquiring more knowledge about social justice and how I could be more involved within my community, make a difference in the world, and jumpstart positive change and equality for all children entering a classroom.

### **What and Who Do I Want to Teach?**

My goal is to work within a kindergarten to sixth-grade elementary classroom setting teaching children of all backgrounds. Because I have served in a region that primarily encompassed families with low socioeconomic status, I have seen how under-resourced these schools are and wish to be an active leader in changing the effect that has on the students within those walls. Without the proper guidance or understanding of what that child's home life is, school systems are failing these students by not providing them with the support they need to be successful in their academic lives. Although I believe that these situations are not foreign to middle-class or even high-class regions, statistically low-income regions show the highest representations of children who have been exposed in one way or another to a form of trauma. Studies also show that if a child experiences more than two traumas then it can hamper their learning capability; hindering them developmentally (Price and Ellis, 2018). Knowing that no child is held responsible for actions they are exposed to, I want to serve in this type of environment to best aid a child in their growth by acknowledging their pain and allowing them to grow from it.

### **The Role of Critical Social Justice**

Critical Social Justice is defined as,

“specific theoretical perspectives that recognize that society is *stratified* (i.e., divided and unequal) in significant and far-reaching ways along social group lines that include race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. Critical social justice recognizes inequality as deeply embedded in the fabric of society (i.e., as structural), and actively seeks to change this” (Sensory and DiAngelo, 2017, pg. xx, para. 3).

My knowledge of critical social justice is a growing understanding and appreciation for the role it will play in my teaching. This is a concept that has and is still being overlooked by many educators which is a disservice not only to that student but our future. I want to harness a classroom culture that radiates the acceptance of all students to allow for the utmost success in each lesson to pay forward in their academic and professional careers.

## **Assets and Needs**

### **My Strengths and Needs**

My strengths derive from the fundamentals I was given as a child; never give up, empathize, and always be kind.

No matter what activity I participated in I always gave it my all and made sure to complete it start to finish. This strength will aid my becoming of being an effective teacher because this attitude transcribes to never giving up on anyone. My success resides in the achievement of my students and I will hold this standard highly as I begin this journey.

Their achievements would not be possible however if I do not take the time to get to know them to build relationships, “we have to not only care *about* students in a general sense but also actively care *for* them in a physical and emotional sense” (Hammond, 2015, pg. 73, para 3). Due to the likelihood of my students’ exposure to trauma, my strength in listening, understanding, and empathizing with what occurs outside of school will play a key role in the making of a safe classroom environment. As Hammond also depicts, when a student feels heard, the process of validation occurs in which a trusting relationship can develop; statically proving improvement in students’ overall school achievements (Hammond, 2015, pg. 75, para 1).

Similarly, the act of kindness goes a lot farther than accredited. Something as small as passing along a smile or cheerful greeting in the hallway can grant a student affirmation and respect (Hammond, 2015, pg. 74, para 1). My goal is to provide a classroom that allows all students to feel welcome, acknowledged, important, and knowing that I will always be there to greet them with a smile.

My greatest need is support from my school. A lot of the time my actions will be based on a relationship-building strategy to ensure my students' academic needs are being fulfilled. Unfortunately, at the beginning of every school year, this will be the hardest to accomplish given the time restrictions. Because of this, I need to be working for a school that recognizes and celebrates my mission to cater to the needs and emotional demands of my students and not dismiss any activities I enact to promote this.

### **My Implicit and Explicit Biases**

Growing up within a White Christian male-dominated world has instilled bias in me that I need to alter. Though I am supportive of all backgrounds going after their dreams, the notion that success is predominately made for the characteristics listed above in addition to a few "lucky" ones that happen to surpass the criteria is so prevalent it is hard to ignore. I have found myself to be more agreeable towards a man's opinion and challenging towards a woman's for no reason other than the fact that I am used to accepting what a man has to say rather than speak against it.

Another bias I face is failing to recognize the assumptions I make throughout the day. Hidden curriculum is problematic for those who are not accustomed to certain American mannerisms. There are traits that some children acquire at home while others have yet to be exposed to yet. For example, many children learn to tie their shoes, sit cross-cross-applesauce,

and raise their hand at home or in early school years. However, if a child has recently moved, comes from a different culture, or is an English Learner, these tasks may seem strange, unfamiliar, and in some cases rude or discriminatory.

### **Using My Strengths to Mitigate the Negative Impact of My Biases**

To mitigate the impact of my biases, I first need to acknowledge their appearance. If I am unaware that I am doing something, then solving the problem would be impossible. Feedback through open discussion or anonymous survey would benefit in identifying the hidden curriculum while hosting motivational debriefs at the end of the week will promote students' worth and impact in this world. Within the school day, I will also utilize Circle to address social norms as well as other topics that students may raise questions. Being able to discuss important issues they encounter through media platforms in addition to mannerisms that have been implemented in past classrooms is necessary to avoid social misconceptions and explore how current events impact us. In addition to this, it would be incredibly helpful to acquire constant observations from a resource who is fully supportive of social justice and its implications to best notice any unaware biases I present throughout the day.

### **Goals**

#### **My Goals and Objectives for First Year of Teaching**

Given the knowledge, I have acquired thus far, my goal as a first-year teacher is to provide a welcoming space for my students that will allow them to feel able to have fun while learning. I want to administer lessons creatively so that my students will be excited to come to school rather than feel as if it is against their will. The experience I had in many classes in elementary school was stressful. There was high importance focused on test-taking and anything

below an A was looked at with mediocracy. I never felt justified or a sense of pride for my contributions to the class which caused anxiety and stress. I want to focus on providing my students the opportunities, tools, and knowledge to become masters themselves so that they can exude joy when entering and leaving the classroom day by day.

### **Challenges and Resources**

Like any new endeavor, there will be challenges and obstacles to cross. However, there are many resources I have readily available. One hindrance that I expect is the hesitance of parental approval. My nerves are high in obtaining this because it is public knowledge that it will be my first-year teaching. I know many will doubt my ability, but I look forward to earning their trust throughout my time with them. If I need help, I can turn to my professors at Claremont Graduate University to lend suggestions or brainstorm with my Master Teacher and colleagues on ways to overcome this.

### **Metrics**

A method to measure my success in this goal would be to implement multiple student and parent feedback opportunities. These surveys will be conducted anonymously so that they can promote the most honest answers. Being able to quantify data will help me see if I am meeting my expectations of promoting excitement-based learning. Parent surveys will be conducted through online servers, while student surveys can be implemented as an exit ticket after a lesson has been given.



### **Part B: Developing Through the Aid of My Scholars**

As I entered my first year of teaching, I knew very little about what to expect. Though my experiences have accounted for the opportunity to work first-hand with students of younger ages, I had yet to hold the perspective of one who owns and cultivates a space with their scholars as to the only adult in the room. As nerve-racking as this seemed, excitement is all that encompassed me. I soon learned that I would be the teacher of 25 transitional kindergarten and kindergarten students of whom more than half had yet to experience an academic setting. My first encounter with my students was overwhelming. The time, effort, and physical energy needed to perform to the best of my ability exceeded my expectations. I will never forget going home that evening and falling asleep in my work clothes barely making it to my bed. Though challenging, I felt determined to teach these students in the ways that would transfer best to everyone. Because of the new environment and experiences, it was as though I was spending all my resources towards co-creating our classroom ecology; having little to no time learning about each student as a person. It was not until the end of September when I realized the importance of knowing who these students are outside of the classroom to further academic success. Some select students showed a sense of struggle with the production of content. However, as I took a step back to look at the bigger picture, I realized that my group of 25 students has all experienced significant life events, are all students of color, and all live in lower socioeconomic regions. Being a person of color myself and reflecting on my own experience in grade school, I realized the discomfort my students may feel from being taught by someone who does not reflect what they see in the mirror. The idea of this combined with the structure of power naturally found in a classroom led me back to my learnings from author Zaraetta Hammond who discusses the bonding hormone, Oxycontin. This hormone is responsible for wanting to create trusting



relationships with those we interact with which can be achieved through kind gestures such as greeting your students both in and outside of the classroom. (Hammond, 2015). Implementing this, I felt an even greater difficulty choosing a specific case to lend my focus towards. As I began researching, I found that no matter who I picked, each day I enter that classroom, I would need to not only take into consideration the mentioned criteria but use this information to prioritize the student-to-teacher relationship with all my students. Above all, each scholar within those walls has a right to feel safe, included, welcomed, and seen in this academic environment and should feel that they hold the capabilities to achieve academic and professional success in life beyond the classroom.

### **Introduction**

Within this section, there will be three case studies that present information culminated through individual interviews, home visits, and next step action plans to support their academic and personal goals. I hope that this process allows my practice as an educator to grow and sophisticate to reach these students' learning needs inside the classroom.

To begin, the students I have focused on all inhibit strengths. This research will reflect their performance academically but more importantly what traits and qualities they bring into the classroom as individuals. The cumulative work files do not classify my first focus student, Natalia, as an English Learner, but after further observation is a Standard English Learner who has the funds of knowledge of speaking Spanish as that is the primary language spoken at home. The second student, Henry, is one whose personality can brighten any room and is currently in the process of officiating an Individualized Education Plan, IEP, for supposed Autism. Lastly, Focus Student three, Michael, is currently experiencing major transitions and adjustments in his

life through the divorce of his parents and the remarriage of his mother. Each of these focus students has brought joy and professional growth in my life as an educator. This ethnographic experience has brought awareness of my own biases and positionality. It has also deepened my reason for why I strive to become a social justice educator. I learned that my cultural upbringing spoke up louder than I had anticipated in stressful situations by taking advantage of the power I held during instruction. I learned to prioritize human emotions and experiences before presenting new information to students who are not yet ready to receive that information. Above all, I learned the importance that “each student has a story, and each story should be heard” (Teaching Tolerance). I am looking forward to this journey and what growth it holds for myself and my three focus students' academic and personal beings.

### **Case Study One<sup>1</sup>: Natalia<sup>2</sup>**

Natalia is a five-year-old, Mexican American, cis-gender female that lives with her mother and older brother in Rialto, California. Natalia attends school at a public charter in San Bernardino that holds a 99% ethnic diversity index where 91% of students obtain free and reduced lunch. The scholars at this school are actively involved in the school setting every weekday from 8 am to 4 pm with one 15-minute recess and a 40-minute lunch break.

Natalia's personality is outgoing and loves to have the stage; as she enjoys participating in activities such as singing and dancing. The decision to interview Natalia was declared based on several reasons, one being the positive student to teacher relationship that has been cultivated.

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<sup>1</sup>All interviews were conducted in Spanish, therefore leading all responses directly translated into the English language to provide aligned consistency, equal understanding, and interpretation of this work.

<sup>2</sup>For this research, all interviewees have been given pseudonyms to keep their identities private.

In addition to this connection, communication with her parent guardian is friendly, responsive, and informative. Natalia's mother is very open to providing the best academic care for her daughter and has been a great support during her daughter's transition into kindergarten. Having this support from home brings comfort in that there is a progressive movement towards furthering Natalia's academic success and reaching her lifelong goals.

Another reason supporting the decision to interview Natalia is due to her current academic and behavioral performance. Natalia is classified as a Standard English Learner who is performing at below grade-level standards in English Language Arts. California state standards that Natalia struggles with are phonics and letter recognition based: RF.K.2, RF.K.3, L.K.1, and L.K.2 (eStandards, 2019). Being able to get to know Natalia more as a person outside of the classroom will help communicate a better understanding of her learning needs. This will grant steps towards aligning her personal and academic goals and aid in formulating best practices during instruction. Accommodations may range from individual work, group work, and how assessments are administered.

Currently, on summative assessments created by the school given curriculum, Wonders, Natalia has struggled; many times, leaving her paper blank. It was observed that this performance was not only credited when students have individual test folders surrounding them but when Natalia is asked to perform classwork independently as well. However, in the group setting Natalia is an excellent participant who eagerly and actively adds to every project presented to her. While working independently, Natalia has shown that one-on-one guidance is required even with modifications to assignments that have been made. Modifications attempted vary from added visual cues and granted personal teacher given directions before addressing the

class as a whole. She is easily distracted when working independently but when given my proximity, she becomes focused and motivated to complete her work.

Natalia has a wonderfully active imagination and can communicate well in Spanish as she story tells and relays information about her family. There lies improvement in her oral and written English language skills and ability to work independently without active aid. Though data proves that ELA is Natalia's area for improvement, it also communicates her strength in math which shows her consistency in high achievement. Natalia can best benefit from self-management methods and adopting a growth mindset. Paired together, these two strategies would aid Natalia in fostering an academic mindset while simultaneously creating comfort in her voice. (Casel, 2018). If an environment is co-created to welcome comfort and confidence in herself, deeper conceptual connections can formulate providing a greater understanding and comfort in the content presented.

### **Interview analysis.**

After interviewing Natalia, my overall understanding of her grew immensely. I learned about her home life more extensively and could rationalize why some behaviors were presenting themselves throughout the academic day. Natalia shared with me that she recently moved into an apartment after the separation of her mother and father. She communicated to me that her father lives in a different place and she was able to spend the whole summer with him despite her wanting to be there, "I was there with him for a while, but I just really missed my mom". She informed me that she has two siblings, both much older than she is, and hardly ever has the chance to see them unless they are spending the night at their apartment. She also communicated to me her love of, "doing backflips" and aspiration to, "grow up and be a teacher". When questioned what her favorite part about school was, it came to no surprise when I received the

answer, "math because I like to use the numbers". She also shared that she enjoys doing her homework because "I get to do it by myself and make my momma proud". Knowing that Natalia is dependent on making those around her proud, a growth mindset is imperative for her to develop. Currently, I believe Natalia feels irritated during English Language Arts because she struggles with aspects of lessons and is feeling ashamed in the answers she has. She may even have perfectionist tendencies which would explain why she would rather leave her paper blank than get anything wrong. When I accompany her during an independent activity, she communicates her thought process aloud to me in Spanish; asking for reassurance that she is doing the correct thing. Once I provide positive feedback, she feels comfortable to write down her answers. A strategy that may positively interfere with future occurrences is presented by Hammond. This strategy is the idea of Back Talk, which allows students to assess their work. (Hammond, 2015). This technique will aid in Natalia's ability to celebrate her progress and assist in her comfort to take on more challenging tasks independently. By ensuring Natalia that it is okay to experience feelings of doubt or uncertainty, I am hoping she will grow confidence in the classroom thus increasing her willingness to take academic risks.

### **Home visit observations.**

The interview took place on Friday, November 14, 2019, in Natalia's home in Rialto, California at three o'clock. Natalia resides with her mother, 29-year-old Monica, and older brother, Hector who is 12 years of age and currently attends a private middle school. The apartment rests in a gated complex that stands beautifully and is excluded from the public. To enter past the gate, a pedestrian must either be greeted at the gate by a resident or obtain a code to enter into a keypad. Surrounding the complex is housing that is not the most attractive. There

was trash in the streets and many vehicles that were not functional or run down. The complex that Natalia lives in has State established housing for low-income individuals and families. The apartment itself was acquired through a Section 8 application that Natalia's mother voiced was thankful to have been approved. Their residence has two bedrooms, one bathroom, a kitchen, a living room, and a patio all located on the first floor. The overall size of the living quarters is comfortable for the three that live there and have vocalized that they, "really enjoy it here because it is big, quiet, and so affordable" (Monica, personal communication, November 14, 2019).

The upkeep of the living quarters was neutral. It was evident that an effort to clean before my arrival was made due to the set dining table ready to be eaten at, and commentary of newly purchased candles to give the apartment a nice aroma. Before the interview began, I received a tour of each room where information about Natalia's sleeping arrangements became understood. It was communicated that there was an attempt to receive a three-bedroom apartment but due to availability, it could not be obtained. With this, Natalia and Monica share a room and Hector occupies the second room. Overall, the apartment is well kept and seems well-liked by the family.

### **Home visit analysis.**

The first thing that was easily observable during the interview was the interactions and relationship Natalia has with her mother. While I was asking Monica questions, Natalia continually interrupted seeking attention from both her mother and me. Though it is typical for children of Natalia's age to seek constant attention, when neither Monica nor I would respond to her in a timely fashion, she would begin to have an outburst of emotion; leaving the dining table to jump up and down aggressively next to her mother or storming off to her room. At this

moment, I felt confused and appalled due to this behavior. Natalia has never acted out in such a way in the class setting, but I was given understanding as I observed Monica's reaction. Initially, Monica's response, was to stop our conversation to meet the wants of her daughter, leading our conversation to go astray. Later throughout our interview, however, Monica began ignoring the behavior which then resulted in Natalia self-soothing by retrieving her baby cousin's bottle which she filled with juice. Observing this behavior is applicable in the classroom due to the attachment Natalia has on my immediate presence while completing classwork and assessments. Knowing that this dependence of adult presence is something that she perceives as a need is something that I can take with me back into the classroom. From this knowledge, I will use the strategy of exclamation and positive reinforcement each time she completes her work independently, without my physical proximity.

Another observable trait that was gained from this interview was the excitement Natalia receives when music played. During the interview, one distraction that Monica used to keep Natalia entertained was playing music videos on the television. After observing her dance moves, Monica shared that, "she loves to dance and always comes home singing the little songs you teach them" (Monica). Knowing the positive impact that music has on Natalia, I will not only continue to encourage music in the classroom but find a way to apply music across subject contents to reinforce objectives and make content more tangible for memorization and understanding.

The next observations were gathered from the direct responses Monica gave through questioning. To begin, Monica detailed the routine she and her children partake in during weekdays. Due to her work schedule, her grandmother drops off and picks up her children from their schools, "she gets paid to drive them so it works for all of us because Natalia's school is so

far” (Monica). This information is applicable due to the emotional state Natalia has been coming to class lately as she communicates how she misses her mom. After bringing this to Monica’s attention, she opened up to provide additional information on the relationship between the two, “oh yeah, she is a little mean to her and she spends a lot of weekends with her already so she does [not] really like that she is taking her to school now” (Monica). Knowing that Natalia is not taking to this new routine kindly, Hammond (2015) communicates the strategy of being responsive practitioners. There is something about this routine that is not settling well with Natalia. Practicing Hammon's strategy will allow an opportunity for deeper communication between us and allow my practices in the classroom to best meet Natalia’s needs in that moment of frustration or sadness. One idea would be to implement a morning check-in process to decompose any negative feelings she is holding onto before the instructional day to grant steps towards aiding to her well-being. This strategy may allow her to her feel safe, supported, and welcomed at school so that she can then feel ready to participate and receive new information during class discussions.

Overall this home visit was successful due to the received information that would have not been established in the school setting. The written strategies will be immediately implemented in the classroom to best serve Natalia and her learning needs.

### **Case Study Two: Henry<sup>3</sup>**

Focus student two is five-year-old Henry who resides in San Bernardino, California. Henry is an African American, cisgender male who is primarily cared for by his mother. This student has been chosen because more knowledge about where this student spends their time

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<sup>3</sup> For this research, all interviewees have been given pseudonyms to keep their identities private.



outside of the classroom would be beneficial for my knowledge to assist in his academic and social performance in the classroom. Henry's developmental stage is atypical. Because he has just entered kindergarten and has not been exposed to a pre-school setting, Henry has rightfully shown difficulty in adapting to his new environment but displays additional behaviors that indicate a call for further modifications to enhance his learning experience. Henry struggles in formulating coherent sentences due to his speech and cognitive development. However, this does not reflect poorly on his participation as he shows genuine want to socialize and answer questions in class. Aside from his wonderful attitude and positivity in the classroom, Henry shows many strengths that range from dancing, working in groups, and his love for books. I can always count on Henry to get up and dance to the letter of the week song or participate during storybook readings to motivate the rest of the class' engagement.

### **Academic Standing**

Henry currently performs at below grade-level standards in ELA and mathematics. He shows growth in language and reading development that relates to letter and sound recognition. He also shows a need for support in counting and cardinality, and operations and algebraic thinking with numbers one through ten. Though supports are needed, Henry always shows a want to learn and participate. For example, during a math problem set, Henry will complete his work to the best of his ability; writing an answer in the box and showing his work. He is not spending his time scribbling or being off task and is displaying that he is understanding what the instructions and expectations are. However, the work and answers he provides on paper do not resemble numbers, which originally left data of failing test scores week after week. Being that this is his first time in school and acknowledging the support he is receiving at home is not strong, his letter and number recognition, production of content, and speaking ability requires

reinforcement. Despite his current inability to notate his thoughts on paper, it was later discovered during a classwork assignment that Henry is orally producing correct answers when asked directly by peers. Due to this observation, I wanted to test the idea of administering Henry's test in a one-on-one setting where he would be able to receive accommodation through his verbal responses. During an assessment that was not modified in any way, a question asked students to color in five blocks green and five blocks blue. It followed by asking students how many blocks there were in total. After noticing Henry's illegible answers, I decided to ask him the instructions kneeling next to him. I began by asking him to color in the five blocks with their respective colors. To my initial shock, Henry colored the blocks in nearly effortlessly. Following this instruction, Henry was asked to then count the total number of squares and write his answer in the box. Standing beside him, Henry successfully counted the squares aloud, stopped on the correct answer, and proceeded to write a happy face into the answer box while commenting on his love for happy faces. Though legibility and the length of his attention span may not be of typical behavior and development, Henry is orally producing retained information that is reflective of what is being taught in the classroom. In addition to test accommodation, Henry has also been recommended by an IEP team the use of a focus stick that grants him the ability to chew throughout the day. This tool's purpose is to aid in his ability to remain on task during group and in-class assignments. Gravitating to its service quickly, Henry is very receptive to this tool and uses it productively.

Though minor accommodations have been made, the need to test Henry is prominent. Unfortunately, the support that has been given to the school by Henry's parent is contrary; believing that the school has been forging data. Thankfully, the relationship between Henry's mother and me is positively developing which grants hope for future testing to take place.

### **Socio-emotional development and identity**

The relationship that Henry and I have built is strong and continues to develop day by day. His mother shares with me that he gets excited to come to school every morning as they discuss what he is going to share in Circle that day. During our interview, Henry showed joy to be able to sit down beside me and answer questions to the best of his ability. Though concrete answers about his opinion regarding academics were difficult to obtain, Henry proudly shared that math was his favorite subject because "I like to count like 1, 2, 3" (Henry, personal communication, October 18, 2019). He also exclaimed his love for school because, "I get to see best friends and Ms. Gatica and I love to be with Ms. Gatica because you nice" (Henry, personal communication, October 18, 2019). Though academics were difficult to cover, the knowledge of his home life expanded and became more vivid. What I gathered from my interview is that Henry is currently living with his mother in a one-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment but visits his grandmother often, "I sleep next to momma but when I with Grandma I get a bigger bed" (Henry, personal communication, October 18, 2019). He also communicated with me his love for his toy collection that he has at home, "I have so many toys in my collection, and I get more Toy Story because of my birthday" (Henry, personal communication, October 18, 2019).

The environment that surrounds him when he is at home with his mother was difficult to listen to as he shared his experience with the neighbors that surround him, "my momma tells me to go play with the big kids. They are so big like this big<sup>4</sup> and I am so small like this, but then I go and they mean to me and tell me "nasty boy, nasty boy" so I run away, far away back to the other side" (Henry, personal communication, October 18, 2019). This quote spoke a lot of

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<sup>4</sup> Interviewee was observed stretching his arms all the way out to represent his neighbor's height.

meaning as it reflects his home life interactions in addition to his self-concept. When showing me how small he thinks he is, Henry held up his left index finger while measuring out the length from his knuckle to the tip of his finger with his right thumb and index finger. Knowing that he feels so small in this world, our classroom, being that of his peers and myself, have taken responsibility in making Henry feel included and loved. Henry is actively involved in our daily routines as he lends his participation as the teacher's helper and becomes elated when given praise and positive acknowledgments by the staff and his peers.

In the short time of a month and a half, Henry has shown immense improvement behaviorally and academically to which I attribute towards his sense of belonging and chewing aid during instruction. He is actively contributing to the learning environment and culture of our classroom and grows excited when answers are in his reach. It is critical to continue to understand Henry outside of the classroom for it has supported his learning inside of the classroom. With time, I hope to strengthen the relationship with his care provider and build trust between the two of us to be able to best provide for Henry's success both in and outside of the classroom.

### **Home visit observations**

The home visit interview took place on November 21, 2019, in Rialto, California at 5 p.m. Upon entrance to the residence, several pedestrians were roaming the area in solitude. It was recommended by Henry's mother that I call before exiting my vehicle so that she could escort me to the door. Aside from lingering personnel, the shell of the apartment complex was in good condition and rests near a neighborhood of homes and a local shopping center.

The apartment that Henry and his mother, Heather, temporarily reside in is a two-story model that is rented by Henry's grandmother. Henry and Heather are occupying the downstairs during Heather's final month of pregnancy due to her current inability to work, "you can't pay rent if you don't have no income" (Heather, personal communication, November 21, 2019). Previously, Henry and Heather lived together in low-income housing that neighbored the school in San Bernardino. This is the residence that Henry spoke negatively about during the one-on-one interview. Moving into the grandmother's house provided less of an economic burden for Heather which I believe allowed her to focus more attention on her and Henry's wellbeing. Locating to Rialto, California did, however, create an obstacle for dropping off and picking up Henry from school, "I have to put twenty dollars in my car almost every other day to get him from here to there and then back again" (Heather, personal communication, November 21, 2019). In addition to the added commute, their living environment was difficult to absorb. A tour of the apartment was not made available, but from what was observed downstairs both Henry and Heather sleep on the same twin air mattress together. Their living space is communal, as it shares the space of the living, dining, and kitchen areas. Due to this placement, frequent disruptions from the bathroom, kitchen, or television could affect the quality of sleep received, "being eight months pregnant has me tossing and turning every night and getting up to use the restroom every five minutes" (Heather, personal communication, November 21, 2019).

I find this information applicable to behaviors Henry exhibits in the classroom. Nearly every day, Henry arrives to class ten to fifteen minutes late, with no expression and tired eyes. After lunch, Henry's body will usually fall into a deep sleep either sitting up in his seat or leaning up against my leg during carpet time. Though I sympathized previously with Henry's tired state due to the long instructional hours our school day holds, after visiting his home I can

attribute some explanation towards the quality and quantity of sleep Henry is most likely obtaining each night.

Heather's sister, Kate<sup>5</sup> also lives in the apartment and rooms upstairs with Henry's grandmother. During the interview, Heather, Kate, and I sat at the dining table to eat dinner while Henry would switch off between taking a bite of pizza and leaving to go play a video game on Heather's phone. This device is what kept Henry occupied throughout my entire visit. What is important about this was the resilient attention he had towards what displayed on the screen. His focus was so intense that when I first arrived and remarked my greeting, his concentration was unbreakable; it was as if I never walked in. It was not until a physical touch to his shoulder was made when he was able to look up and realize that I was there. Once he was able to process my presence, his eyes widened, a smile grew, and look of surprise overcame his face, "Ms. Gatica? It's Ms. Gatica! Momma look it's Ms. Gatica! Ms. Gatica you here!" (Henry, personal communication, November 21, 2019). This initial experience alone communicates two things in particular that I can bring back to the classroom. Firstly, observing his expertise as he navigated through his game and phone, in general, was impressive. During dinner, Henry would come up to the table, show me a picture from the photo gallery, explain what it was I was looking at, and then exit the enlargement to scroll through the photo stream again until he found another that sparked his interest. His ability to operate electronics so well has never been observed and therefore never accounted for in his funds of knowledge. Because our school site does not have access to technology, this skillset would have been overlooked. Secondly, I had never observed Henry exhibit such concentration and interest in something for such a long time. Placing his

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<sup>5</sup> Interviewee's given pseudonyms to keep their identities private.

expertise and interest in mind, an online academic game to grow letter recognition and phonemic awareness can be implemented to aid in reaching his learning goals.

The last person to reside in this location is Henry's grandmother, Rita<sup>6</sup>. The family dynamic observed by Heather and Kate seemed supportive of Henry's academic and personal growth. However, the tension lies between Henry and Rita. As she entered through the front door to see my presence, what was alarming were the vocal remarks Henry made, "Grandma! Grandma! Look it's Ms. Gatica! Ms. Gatica is here! Are you going to fight her? You said you were going to fight her!" (Henry, personal communication, November 21, 2019). As my gaze enlarged, Henry's grandmother quickly dismissed Henry's statements by saying, "go away and stop talking. No one ever understands your crazy talk anyway" (Rita, personal communication, November 21, 2019). I did not feel in danger from her presence, but I was left feeling uncomfortable and bothered at the choice of words used towards Henry. As she made her way upstairs, Heather seemed enthused as she disclaimed Rita's feelings towards me, "she don't like you because Henry don't stop talking about 'Ms. Gatica', and every time she tries to teach him something, he tells her to do it like 'Ms. Gatica'" (Heather, personal communication, November 21, 2019). What I took away from this interaction was the language used to speak directly towards Henry. Through the one-on-one interview, it was gathered that his self-conception is small. I first thought that that image was made from the outside influences found in his old neighborhood. Now having heard the language used towards him at home, these types of interactions with his loved ones may play an equal role to his self-identity. I believe that helping Henry to adopt a growth mindset<sup>7</sup> early on will benefit in his academic and personal wellbeing.

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<sup>6</sup> Interviewee's given pseudonym to keep their identities private.

<sup>7</sup> Growth mindset is defined by Carol Dweck as the ability to gain academic ability through effort and perseverance.

(Dweck, 2017). As Henry's comprehension levels advance, hurtful words can affect the way he sees himself and his ability to succeed. Instilling this strategy into the classroom will not only benefit Henry's self-conception but will aid the class in doing the same.

### **Home visit interview**

At first, I was afraid that I would not receive permission to visit their home. The school-to-parent relationship did not start on the best foot. In the first month of school, allegations towards Henry's learning ability was strongly declared by the administration to Heather. This being Henry's first year in the academic setting, Heather could not get behind how the administration of the school could be so declarative towards a learning disability so early on, "they were telling me that my son had learning problems. Like no! He's five-years-old and never been in school before" (Heather, personal communication, November 21, 2019). My involvement in this matter was not made aware until one evening during pick-up. Thankfully Heather did not attribute any of her negative feelings towards me as she indicated, "the only reason I didn't pull him out is because he comes home telling me all these things that he learned and I know he loves your class. But next year I'll put him in the school right here" (Heather, personal communication, November 21, 2019). Because of this incident, I ensured to try to build a positive relationship with her before asking for permission to conduct a home visit. I did not want her to feel that there was any purpose other than to learn more about Henry and strengthen my teaching techniques to best reach his learning needs. Thankfully, there was no hesitation in allowing my visit and later proved to itself to be comfortable and enjoyable.



As I began asking her questions from the home visit protocol<sup>8</sup>, both Heather and Kate were very receptive to providing detailed responses. We began with their family dynamic. Heather is the oldest of seven siblings and is half African American and half Puerto Rican. She explained how she only keeps in contact with her youngest sister, Kate, and brother, Edgar due to the criminalization of her father and other siblings. Henry's father is African American and no longer associates with the family for reason untold. For this reason, "[Henry] don't have no strong male role model around him so I'm a little bit worried. He's such a Momma's boy" (Heather, personal communication, November 21, 2019). She then described what their regular day consists of and how weekends are just the two of them hanging around the house. Due to the current stage of pregnancy, "I can't do much or go nowhere just in case I go into labor" (Heather, personal communication, November 21, 2019). She remarked how there are few children in the neighborhood, and none of Henry's age, "they either babies or big, and he'll go talk to anyone you know but I don't want him wandering around with them yet" (Heather, personal communication, November 21, 2019).

### **Next steps**

Overall the home visit was successful. I enjoyed my time spent there and received a lot of new information that applies to the classroom. Moving forward, Henry will partake in small group breakout sessions for English Language Arts through Multi-Tiered System of Supports, MTSS<sup>9</sup>. This implementation will focus on the development of letter and sound recognition through small group support to grant the most access to this material at least three days a week.

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<sup>8</sup> Home Visit Protocol lists out the questions asked during the interview and can be found in the Appendix.

<sup>9</sup> "MTSS provides a basis for understanding how California educators can work together to ensure equitable access and opportunity for all students to achieve the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)" (California Department of Education, 2019).

Throughout the first trimester, it was observed how well Henry participates when given one-to-one instruction. Before official accommodations can be made, providing this more intimate learning space for him may help meet his needs.

Another adaptation that will be taking place is the use of technology to access Henry's funds of knowledge. Though our classroom does not have this resource, the third-grade classroom has a set of Chromebooks that can be converted into tablets and lent for Henry's aid four times a week. Though the size of the actual device is larger, I believe that Henry will take quickly to this device as he navigates through educational games to support his learning development.

Lastly, the school has hired a residential substitute that will be on campus three times a week to provide support in all classrooms. If accepted by Henry, her aid will be beneficial during seated whole group instruction to reiterate instructions and provide support with written annotations as needed.

### **Case Study: Michael<sup>10</sup>**

Focus student three is four-year-old Michael who is African American and resides in San Bernardino, California with his mother, stepfather, and two step-siblings. Michael entered our kindergarten class about a week after school had begun in early September due to behavioral problems occurring at his previous school site. This student was chosen to be interviewed due to the possible correlation between the behaviors he presents in the classroom and his home life situation. Michael is incredibly outgoing and loves to be the center of attention. His strengths also reside in mathematics and leadership ability. However, Michael is quick to become off task

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<sup>10</sup> For this research, all interviewees have been given pseudonyms to keep their identities private.

and due to his charismatic personality, easily persuades those around him to follow in his footsteps. Problems occur however when students who surround him wish not to partake in his actions. Michael is quick to anger and will physically harm his peers both in and outside of the classroom by pulling hair, pushing, and kicking. Aside from behavioral improvement, Michael is currently performing below grade-level standards in English Language Arts as he is unable to write his name or identify letters. Michael is classified as an EO student, as there is no other language spoken in his home besides English.

On English Language Arts assessments, Michael shows very little interest in completing his work. Often, he attempts to talk with students next to him, or if that is unsuccessful, will attempt across the room conversation. This may be caused by a lack of understanding of the material presented in the assessment and he may be filling the void of not knowing the answers with something he does know and like to do which is talk. During math assessments, an attempt to complete problems is visible, however, the behavior presented while the class is testing is highly distracting for the other test-takers. Therefore, Michael's ability to work independently needs improvement and may benefit if the assignment were tailored to his interests. During group work, Michael struggles with sharing materials and often causes a classroom disturbance that needs teacher attention to solve. The classroom culture includes student jobs, in which Michael has obtained the position of materials manager for his table in hopes to lessen the disruptions created when students are required to share a resource. However, this has led to more disagreements with students due to the damage that Michael creates on materials such as pencils and crayons. Often, Michael finds relief in chewing or breaking writing utensils, so when it is time to redistribute these materials, Michael will treat himself to a newer item and grant another student at his table the chewed or broken item.

This student's overall creativity is high; quickly able to add his original ideas to story writing, illustrating book pages, and participating in music time. His communication skills are strong, but where Michael lacks is in critical thinking. In most instances during rigorous activity, Michael will distract himself by drawing on the table or find another outlet. This is believed to occur possibly due to other situations and scenarios running through his mind all day. His home life is difficult; as Michael's biological father is still in his life but is not liked upon by his mother or stepfather. A parent-teacher meeting has taken place both with his father and on a separate occasion with his mother. In the meeting with his father, it was evident that he was under the influence of marijuana due to the aroma that quickly filled the classroom. This information clarifies why Michael enters the classroom distraught on some mornings and will nap occasionally throughout the day. The tension between his mother and father seems high as his mother has proclaimed statements of her resentment towards how his father chooses to spend his time with Michael. This tension alone may affect Michael's day as he is learning at a very young age how to deal with the separation of his parents and having another father figure in his life.

### **Socio-emotional development and identity**

During the sit-down interview between Michael and myself, many new characteristics of his persona became known. The interview began with questions regarding his home life situation and where he spends most of his time when he is not at school, "my mom picks me up most of the time but then my dad will come the other times and take me to Castle." It was also asked where he enjoys his time most and his response was mutual but declared that he likes it, "when my dad is here because then I play football". Feeding on this answer, it was discovered that Michael is a huge sports fan, "I can play football all day and still not be tired". This answer

explains a lot of situations that have occurred in the classroom that resulted in his tackling of other students to the ground and claiming it to be just playing. Michael's self-concept, however, is not as strong as he presents himself. When asked what he is good at, he simply shrugged his shoulders. After probing, Michael reflected that "I like to play sports" but never declared his status of being good at it. This answer reflects highly on his performance in the classroom and why the effort he produces is minimum. If he does not feel confident in his abilities outside of the classroom at something he enjoys doing, then his expectations of performing highly at something he is unsure of corresponds. After being asked what he likes most about school Michael stated, "I like my friends and lunchtime". He also commented on his favorite subject being math because "we use things during math like the dice and the cubes". This information is helpful because this tells me that Michael is a kinesthetic learner who may need to tangibly hold something in his hands while learning a new concept. This comment also supports his way of processing information and serves as an explanation for the damage that occurs to many of our classroom materials. With this, a processing tool that can be physically held such as a stress ball may serve as an excellent aid to Michael's academic development. Knowing this information and implementing a new strategy will hopefully grant progress for Michael's academic growth and behavior in school.

### **Home visit observations**

A home visit with Michael was made on November 19, 2019, in San Bernardino, California. The drive from the school to the apartment complex was about fifteen minutes by street and passed many corner liquor stores, solo pedestrians, and littered streets. When reaching the destination there was no option for street parking aside from a supermarket across the main street. I pulled over to call Michael's mother and she instructed to pull up to the gate so she could

let me into the complex. The apartments as a whole were located on a busy street, excluded from the general public, and positioned in solitude relative to its surroundings. The buildings showed signs of weather damage from the summer and winter months. Parking is for residents only and as mentioned, a gate key is needed to bypass the electronic gate.

The apartments are considered low-income housing and are all one story. The unit Michael lives in is a two-bedroom, two-bathroom space that holds five people: his mother, stepfather, and two older stepbrothers. Once I parked, I began walking towards Michael's mother, Trisha, who greeted me warmly. Out of nowhere, Michael and two other boys around the same age sprinted past us as if we were not there. Trisha immediately prompted them to greet me with a handshake before leading me inside. As I entered through the front entrance, I was footed in the living area that housed a big-screen television and large sectional couch. Beyond that were the dining table and kitchen. Before I could observe more thoroughly, both Trisha and Michael continued walking forward until turning towards a closed door. Gleaming with pride, Michael presented his room to me with his two older brothers. As I entered, there was a raised bunk bed that accommodated three twin-sized beds and another large big-screen television. Immediately to the right of the room was the first restroom that the boys share. Overall the apartment was well furnished, comfortable, and well kept.

### **Home visit interview**

The interview itself was unlike the others that I experienced. As the date and time were planned out, I gave Trisha my contact information to solidify plans. However, as the day approached I never received a confirmation message and on the interview day, Michael was absent from class. The following day Trisha's approach was apologetic and asked to reschedule the meeting. Feeling at ease we found a new date that worked and set a time. When asked what

type of food I should pick up for us to eat, Trisha replied, “it’s okay, I usually cook” (Trisha, personal communication, November 14, 2019). On the day of the interview, I had still not received a confirmation message from Trisha but at the end of the day, I was able to talk to her as she picked Michael up. She sent me her home address then and there and confirmed verbally that the time in the calendar would still work. Food was offered once more but she exclaimed reassurance as she spoke about her passion for cooking. Despite the insistence, I did not want to arrive empty-handed so I brought along a dessert to share after dinner.

Once I arrived I quickly gathered that the family had already eaten dinner together before my arrival. Quickly brushing off the miscommunication on my part, I gifted the dessert and it was well-received. As I was welcomed into their home, everything began to feel rushed. I was unable to set up my laptop to take notes because I was never offered to sit down. Being that this was not my space, I wanted to respect the choices being made and remained standing for the hour and a half that I was there. Both parents were present and were more interested in asking me questions about my experiences in and out of school in addition to the progress that Michael has shown thus far. As we conversed, Michael was aggressively playing basketball and football with his second-grade stepbrother while the only intervention being enforced was to not, “throw the football over your teacher” (Trisha, personal communication, November 19, 2019). Though it did feel forced at times to try to change the subject to reflect questions found in the Home Visit Protocol, I do believe that I gained valuable knowledge from their responses.

Most of the visit I spent in Michael’s room getting to know his brothers while Trisha walked in and out every so often to answer any questions inferred. Eventually, I decided to make my way back out to the living room where Trisha and her husband were sitting at the dining room table. As a friendly conversation between the three of us commenced I began to feel more

at ease and welcomed. Before this moment I was under the impression that this home visit was going to end prematurely. After taking a step back, there may have been a miscommunication between us that led Michael's parents to have envisioned the home visit in a different light; possibly believing I was there to observe Michael in this environment rather than discuss it with them firsthand.

### **Home visit analysis**

As I began asking questions, there were frequent interruptions caused by Michael and his brothers either accidentally tacking too hard and hurting each other or throwing the ball too hard and nearly breaking something. This observation applies to the behaviors seen in the classroom. Often, Michael's actions commonly involve roughhousing with other students through physical interaction. Observing that this behavior and type of play with his siblings are allowed at home offers the perspective of strengthening the ability to adapt between the home and school environments. Given that this is Michael's first experience in the academic setting, this area can be supported through time and reminders of what the classroom norms are. A strategy to implement this would be to allow him to draw a picture of what is acceptable to do at school and what is acceptable to do at home. This will allow him to contextualize what is being asked of him in each environment.

Throughout the first trimester, Michael's behavior has improved significantly. In September, several interactions would result in concern for the other students' safety. For that reason, Michael would have to leave the classroom for moments at a time to calm himself from the anger he was feeling. Knowing that his parents had recently separated and remarried, Trisha commented on how during that time, her husband and stepsons had newly moved into their apartment. As Trisha was explaining the nervous feeling towards allowing this to happen and



how Michael would react, she remarked how "it was hard on him in the beginning but I'm happy we did it because those boys are good role models for him. Like they always do their homework and help Michael with his. It's good for him to see that right now and they're getting along really well I think" (Trisha, personal communication, November 19, 2019). Applying this to the classroom, it is evident that Michael is currently going through a transition in his life and has been having a difficult time processing the information. Though Michael is showing acceptance of his new living situation, this will be an ongoing adjustment for him as he continues to mature both personally and academically.

In addition to the new living arrangements, Michael's biological father is still active in his life which may result in feelings of confusion or anger. Trisha stated that "there is no schedule for what days he goes where but for the most part he's with me even on weekends" (Trisha, personal communication, November 19, 2019). Having this flexibility can be seen both positively and negatively however, as recommended by the Miller Law Group (2017) establishing a routine for children of divorce is crucial. Implementing a routine allows the child to create normalcy in what is perceived to be chaos in the child's mind. With spontaneity comes the unknown which in turn creates anxiety and frustration. This strategy is not only useful in the home setting but in school as well. By implementing daily routines and procedures that can be communicated with Michael beforehand, he will not be taken aback from inconsistency or different schedules each day. In addition to keeping a commitment to daily routines, the strategy of frontloading a lesson before its delivery will serve well. Michael's personality is big and loves attention. If he is given knowledge before a lesson, his participation will rise due to his confidence and certainty in the material.

### **Next steps**

Academically, Michael entered the school year testing below basic in letter recognition, L.K.1, phonemic awareness, RF.K.2, and sight word recognition, RF.K.3 (eStandards, 2018). For the past month, Michael has consistently improved in these standards. He is currently participating in the ELA MTSS small group intervention system in which data has shown continued progress. His confidence levels have observably risen as he readies himself for the timed letter recognition test remarking how he is going to “crush it”. He has shown ownership over his learning and takes pride in high marks on his formal exams.

Moving forward, Michael will continue to receive MTSS in English Language Arts with the added focus on penmanship. He will also continue developing a growth mindset and a positive framework to deepen his well-being and academic growth. The implementation of the current behavior plan will remain in place until reminders to keep his hands and feet to himself to keep the classroom safe become minimal. Once this is achieved, together we will discuss a new area of focus that he would like to work on such as being resourceful and respecting school property and materials.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this process, I have grown tremendously as a teacher and as a scholar. I became more aware of the impacts of social-emotional learning, SEL<sup>11</sup> both for myself and my students. This process has allowed me to discover the importance of how positive supports and wellness deeply contribute to the ability to having a clear and readied mindset. I have learned new techniques to better my students’ emotional and academic learning while cultivating a

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<sup>11</sup> “Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL, 2019).

positive and nurturing environment. This process was difficult and at times taxing, but it allowed me to broaden my scope of experiences to include those of whose lives I am directly affecting. I always knew that to learn, one needs to feel safe and secure; away from worries and anxiety. What I failed to recognize is that the classroom is a space that is created together, and with that carries the story of each individual, including my own. It was initially easy to ignore the history of these students because I was preoccupied with my ability to keep my head above water. First-year teaching has allowed me to explore many avenues of my being and in doing so, asked my class to build off of something that was never created; trust. In turn, this created an unbalanced and structurally unequal classroom. I enforced my students to trust me with their learning but did not offer the same in return. Together we have created a culture where love is prioritized because where there is love, fear is not. I believe that getting to know the families of my students allowed me to see this most clearly. For eight hours a day, my students and I share space and then they return home. During that time, it is my job to ensure that they feel a sense of belonging, safety, and comfort in expressing their personal and academic abilities and push boundaries to reach their goals.

Each individual brings so much into the classroom that is oftentimes untold or understood by those around them. With this experience, I have opened my perspective and allowed three students' lives into my own. Though three students account for 12% of my class, my outlook and strategies for entering each day into the classroom have changed remarkably. Recognizing the large percentage of students that I have yet to learn more deeply about makes me wonder how much more my teaching practice will continue to evolve to meet each of my students' needs.



## **Part C: My Community, School, and Classroom**

### **Section 1 - Community Context**

The school site to which I serve resides in San Bernardino, California. This city was founded in 1857 and served as a leading location during the gold rush and acted as the central location for trading in California during that time. During the 20th century, the city's growth became evident as the popularity of the service industry grew and several tourist attractions developed such as the nation's largest outdoor amphitheater. Unfortunately, the grounds of this city brought trouble for many of its residents as it is prone to wildfires. In the 21st century, thousands of homes have since become victims of wildfires and earthquakes. (World Population Review, 2020). In 2012, the city of San Bernardino filed for bankruptcy which affected the economic growth of the city (World Population Review, 2020). Through economic hardship, this city continues to ratify the service industry which grants students exposure to food and retail companies; unveiling the operations and backbones to how a business functions, aids in the growth of in-person communication, and quantifying monetary amounts.

### **Demographics**

Despite the city's declaration of bankruptcy and terrorist attacks, it has seen a constant growth in population. Currently, San Bernardino houses a population of 215,941. Of this group, the two largest demographics that occupy this city are Latino/a, 58.12%, and African American/Black, 13.84% (World Population Review, 2020). The median household income is \$41,027 a year and employs 78,721 persons. Currently declared, the poverty rate of this city is 30.6% (Census Bureau 2020).

The landscape of the region largely encompasses many retail stores both industry and individually owned. The grounds are developed which allows for the ease and ability for public

and private transportation, however, they are not maintained on a daily or weekly basis. Several traffic stop lights are not functioning and have been out of service for weeks at a time. This disrupts the flow of traffic and difficulty for those traveling by other modes of transportation such as bicycle or foot. Additionally, roads are unkept and are presented with trash and potholes which can be damaging to vehicles. Surrounding the streets are apartment complexes and neighborhoods with single-story homes that often are surrounded by tall wooden fences and guarded by one or more dogs. The landscape of most houses is dirt based and often contain child toys in the yard.

The two most spoken languages in this region are English, 48.2%, and Spanish, 47% (World Population Review, 2020). Over the decades, the Latinx population has increased in San Bernardino county thus increasing the usage of the Spanish language. However, this data does not speak on behalf of my school site which encompasses 97% African American children. In my experience, I have come to the understanding that my students are cognizant of two racial groups: White and Black. This may be due to the age group I am instructing, but in moments of explaining my racial identity aloud, they are not fully understanding of the information I am conveying. They do however understand that Spanish is another language and they are eager to learn new sayings and phrases throughout the school day.

The city of San Bernardino has a 58.3% participation in the labor force while 11.3% are declared unemployed (US Census, 2018). According to this five-year survey performed by the US Census, it was found that 15% Black and 11.5% Hispanics were the two most dominant racial groups identified as unemployed. Applying this information to my school site, most of my scholars come from single-parent homes that are in the workforce. Because of the operating hours of instructional time this school lends, it is ideal for the working parent. Many even have

their scholar stay after school to work on homework or participate in other activities until five o'clock to accommodate their schedules. Many of my scholars' parents are truck operators, airport employees, or work with the homeless and foster organizations.

### **Housing and Resources**

There are several housing options for families that reside in San Bernardino. There are Projects nearby and several students in my class live in the apartment complex across the street from the school. This complex is classified as low-income housing and requires families to apply and show proof of income to live there. Other scholars live in nearby apartment complexes with their parents but often speak about staying at their grandparents' house on the weekends. Very few describe their home life setting to be spacious or having their own bedrooms. Several of my students have older and younger siblings that they share a room with and help take care of daily.

In this community, there are several resources available to families in need of various items. The Department of Motor Vehicles is located just five minutes away from our campus. Additionally, the San Bernardino County Transitional Assistance Department, which lends support for individuals and families to meet their basic needs and achieve long term economic self-sufficiency, is just up the street (Commonwealth, 2020). This community is easy to navigate and provides an array of fast food options and convenience stores.

Commonly, many families in this community need services that support technology such as WIFI and cell-phone carriers. Additionally, many families with children require primary care and physicians. In some cases, I have found that parents face financial difficulty with car repairs, maintenance, or gasoline fill-ups. It has even come to my attention that childcare is difficult to obtain when school is not in session i.e. holidays and weekends.

With these needs, there are support groups my school has created that allow a parent to get their child to and from school safely. This includes carpooling methods for families that live close to one another. Additionally, some services allow working families free internet access and cellphone usage. Though economically this city is not one with the elites, I have noticed a team effort in this community that builds people up to support the whole. In other communities, I have found that it is very individualistic. In this region, however, I feel a group effort from all parts to get their child the best education possible.

### **Problematize the Issue**

Within the last ten years, the city of San Bernardino has been ridiculed for its gang violence, poverty, and drug population. According to The Sun, San Bernardino is ranked to be the third most dangerous city in the United States due to the daily crime and residents' financial status of poverty (Media News Group, 2020). Many place blame on the African American and Latinx demographics this city holds, however, speaking statistically, the city has a 28.35% rate of graduating high school students and 8.2% graduating with a bachelor's degree (US Census, 2018). Looking closely into this data, the US Census of 2018 also reported that of those who graduated high school, the Hispanic population fell in comparison to all other demographics. As mentioned previously, the City of San Bernardino is home largely to this racial group, yet it seems that the school system is failing many. Why is this? Looking back at the data and focusing on the two major languages spoken within the city limits are largely English and Spanish. This informs me that the school systems in place within these grounds are not reaching the needs of many if not all Spanish speaking students. These students then become adults in a working force that they have been ill-prepared for. Having experienced the difficulty it is to obtain a job with a bachelor's degree, I could not imagine the complexity behind what is truly available for those in



active search for a job without a high school diploma. However, the gift of time is not something many of this population obtains. Several come from households with many family members that need financial support, so retaking classes is not something that many choose to do. With the time pressing need to produce money, many follow paths that lead to crime and imprisonment. The issue is not them and their choices, but the choices of a system that failed them from the beginning. Placing more importance on supporting Spanish speaking students K-12 may produce a stronger number of high school graduates. This, in turn, will lead to more educational and career-based opportunities for those in this community.

## **Section 2 – Community Events & Community Members**

Being that the demographics of this community are prominently Latinx and African American, February holds much importance as it is labeled as Black History Month. Though this should not be the only time to acknowledge African American heroes, traditions, and culture, local events both community-wide and school-wide hold productions that serve as educational opportunities to become more well-versed in the antiquity of the community.

Immersed in a school that is primarily Africa American, I had the honor of experiencing weekly celebrations that paid tribute to Black heroes and traditions. In addition to themed Friday's, our school site committed to putting on a Black History play that would include every student it encompasses grades kindergarten to third. The process began with administering the script that students took home to rehearse for the part they wanted. Auditions and casting shortly followed and it was not long after, that after school rehearsals began.

Every student, whether they were cast as a role or not, was fully active in making this production possible. Each class was given a theme and the task to create a piece that would be

inserted after a scene of the play. Anything from spoken word, poetry, song, or dance, was welcomed to encourage students to best showcase their abilities while conveying the theme. For my kindergarten class, we were assigned “freedom” and voted to perform a song with original choreography. The song chosen was, “What Can One Little Person Do” originally composed by Sally Rodgers and addresses five prominent figures in Black History.

For two weeks leading up to the play that would be performed in front of a live audience, students were granted time to rehearse the play in its entirety to perfect staging and timing cues. As I walked the halls during recess and lunch breaks, I would hear students from all grade levels practicing their parts with friends to ensure that they were executing each dance move and each word in perfect synchronization. It was such a joy to witness the passion and creativity during this rehearsal period and how much meaning this play held for so many of our students.

The day of the show was one to be remembered. Students were bussed over to the performance hall where parents, guardians, and community members gathered. The event was significantly attended. Admission was free to all and within minutes of the doors opening, the seating was quickly filled, and the back of the room served as standing room only. As the play began unraveling, I was overwhelmed with pride of what a remarkable job these children, no older than nine years old, were presenting to a room filled with watchful eyes. It was an amazing experience to witness these students’ portrayal of Black History come to life. There was so much raw emotion, that audience members and staff alike became expressive during several parts of the play. From monologues to whole school performances, these children delivered a heartfelt, educational, and creative performance that left a lasting impression.

After the show completed, teachers were responsible for their class and ensuring each student went home to their correct family member. As parents and loved ones came up to gather

their child, the room was in an uproar of how powerful this play was. One conversation that I had with a parent brought us to converse heavily on the piece the first-grade boys performed.

Together, they recited a spoken word that addressed police brutality. As they recited line after line, signs would emerge with the name and age of a young Black male who fell victim to these circumstances. As the boys finished their piece, the lights went out and all that remained lit were the signs that were raised. This message was so strong that it brought many to tears but what is most powerful are the sequential conversations and questions I had. It encouraged me to search more deeply on this issue and begin problematizing why this still occurs in our modern-day world.

Another thought-provoking conversation I had was with an elderly couple. Being members of the Black community, they voiced how special this experience had been for them due to the disconnect they find many young Black scholars have with their roots. Both being retired educators, they remarked how many of their past students were not familiar with or knowledgeable of several historical events, and found that many of these stories are unheard of or taught in grade school. I believe that it is wonderful what this school site is implementing and how they are tapping into the community and using resources to allow their students to fully immerse themselves in their culture's history.

As the school year continued, there were several events that I participated in preparing scholars to attend such as the Black History Bee. Third-grade scholars at my school site had been preparing for months in lead up to this event to be held. Organized by the National Sorority of Phi Delta Kappa, this competition invites students from all schools within the City of San Bernardino to compete by correctly identifying important African American heroes, reciting poems written by Black authors, and lastly, answering African American history questions

(Highlandnews, 2020). Over 550 participants, teachers, and parents occupied the room in which the Bee was held, and our students beautifully represented their knowledge. Being an observer in an event like this opened my eyes to how a community that is often overlooked and underappreciated rises above to place value on the history of its people and residents. I found value not only from the existence of this event but from what I learned from the children as they competed. There was so much confidence, passion, and awareness of the culture being quizzed from all participants, African American, Latinx, and Caucasian alike.

Entering the month of March, uncertainty began to enter the lives of everyone worldwide as the spread of the virus, COVID-19, became more aggressive than foreseen. Within the first two weeks, the knowledge of what was assumed to be just the bad flu became a deadly virus infecting thousands of people around the globe. On March 13, 2020, my school site, along with all others in San Bernardino County, declared a mandatory closure until further notice. This virus evolved to be more than a Pandemic, but as fear, stress, and anxiety of what our world has become. Many parents reached out in panic of their child getting left behind academically especially when fighting to keep up in a world that already allocates educational resources unevenly. Unable to relate to how parents were feeling, I became scared for the very possibility that we may not be returning to campus for the rest of the school year. Weeks later, I attended a board meeting via the digital platform, YouTube Live, where board members from the City of San Bernardino came together virtually to discuss the timeline of school closures. The format of this meeting closely mirrored what an in-person meeting would look like. There was a PowerPoint presentation displayed on the screen, and different board members began covering topics as the slides progressed. At the end of each subtopic, they would open the floor to questions from the public; the most vocal being teachers and parents of students, kindergarten

through twelfth grade. Though the overall tone of this meeting was professional, there was clear stress looming in the ambiguity and uncertainty this Pandemic has lent itself to. In summary, the city opted to keep schools closed until further notice but to anticipate and plan for the rest of the year being taught synchronously and asynchronously. The meeting went on to cover what these types of learning look like, and further addressed other longed answers to questions relating to technology distribution and food resources. No city, county, or state had anticipated this to occur, but I found comfort in the answers the board was able to provide in such a short amount of preparation time. Attending this board meeting grounded me in my position as an educator and allowed me to feel supported as I delve into uncharted territory. Above all, it was reassuring to know that this city expels resources to find solutions to very daunting scenarios and puts in the time and effort to make their community members feel heard and acknowledged.

### **Section 3 – School Site Research**

#### **The School Site**

The school site that I work in is in the heart of San Bernardino, California. The school shares a building with a non-denominational church that occupies the classrooms after school on Wednesdays and Sundays for youth groups of all ages. This partnership has created tension between the two parties due to regulations held on both ends not being followed to the liking of the other. Aside from the differences held between the leaders of both, this shared space has affected my teaching in interesting ways. On several occasions, I have walked into my room Monday and Thursday morning to find snacks embedded in the carpet, ants in the sink, and my personal belongings scattered or broken. I have adapted by purchasing a handheld vacuum, packing up my room Wednesdays and Fridays, and locking away as many items as possible. However, efforts were not always successful as it has happened when I discover vandalized

material of mine during instruction. Despite the altercations, I am grateful for the experience of working in a shared environment and will take these adaptations with me if I ever find myself in a similar situation.

There are two buildings of the school, one being where the office is located, and the other where all classrooms, gymnasium, and cafeteria are. The primary building is small, but it lends itself nicely to the current size of the school. This school was founded by three individuals who had worked together in the past and came together to make their vision of what a school should become true. Last year was its first year in operation and was opened as a public charter for grades kindergarten through second with an ambition to grow by one grade level each year. As of this year, there are about 190 students in total, equating six operating classrooms: two kindergartens, two first grade, one second grade, and one third grade. As a result, the staff reflects its population size, leading there to be six teachers, one director of operations, one secretary, one lunch aid, and two physical education staff members. Of this staff, two of them wear multiple hats and assume the roles of both an administrator and teacher.

From my experience working in this environment, I have discovered an unorganized yet demanding atmosphere. It is clear that there is passion and a need to succeed, but there are still many topics to which the school is still sorting through and identifying what works and what does not. Additionally, this school was founded by three individuals, two of whom are active teachers in the classroom. This dynamic has proved itself to be uncomfortable at times for those employees such as me who are not a part of the close family bond they have created with one another. This is understandable but becomes uncomfortable when the temperature in the room is difficult to navigate as many unspoken items are accidentally brought up but retracted due to the lack of common knowledge for the new staff members. I have adapted to this setting but have

become inept in vocalizing my thoughts and opinions due to the clear differences of beliefs and cultural standing I hold in comparison to the rest of the staff. Being one of two Latinas in a school that encompasses 97% African American students and staff is powerful because it makes me feel like I am representing my population and background. However, being in this position only becomes uncomfortable if racial slurs or other inappropriate comments are mentioned. This has not happened often, and when it has, it was spoken from a staff member who may not have meant it intentionally. The situation is addressed and handled by the administration immediately and a check-in process to ensure my comfort was always made. In addition to this, the staff as a whole is comprised of people who have close relations with one another, leaving only three staff members who are new faces to the group. This is a wonderful thing, but as we collaborate during team meetings, we are grouped off and the new employees are together while the others are together. This is already an uncomfortable format, but on one occasion as our groups are conversing, I stopped talking and listened to the conversations being had on the other table. What was being said was negative commentary about the new employees. I did not share this experience with my fellow new hires, but this instantly lowered my morale for working within this school site. It communicates unprofessionalism and disrespect towards the individuals who are a part of their vision and above all, within earshot away from hearing these hurtful comments. For this reason, along with the high tension of being dismissed as an employee at any moment, the moral of the new staff is low. Despite my personal experiences with the professional staff, working with parents and students is a positive experience that elevates my level of moral. Subsequently, I believe that parents and students alike share a high moral in coming to school each day. During this pandemic, there has been documented evidence of parents going out of their way to publicly post on social media regarding their pride in their

school. The reputation this school lends itself to is strict but efficient. Most parents review their child's experience positively and claim that the subtracting schooling method is exactly what their child needs. My opinions of the structured rules in place differ tremendously to the classroom norms and environment the students and I co-created, but as soon as their feet step outside of our room, students know exactly how to embody themselves to keep away from being in trouble.

### **Personnel**

The teacher colleague I chose to interview was Mrs. Jackson, a lifelong learner who has been in the classroom since 1995 and inspires me in my educational journey. Since the beginning of the school year, Mrs. Jackson has always lent a helpful hand by offering constructive criticism and positive feedback on lessons of mine that she has taken the time to watch. I had the honor of speaking to her about her passion for teaching before school closures and what she had to say about her craft and working within this school site left me feeling so motivated and moved. She is an African American woman who previously taught within the public school system for over twenty years. She voiced how when she first entered this career, there was a sense of purpose and belonging, but as the years went by her initial inspiration became "clouded with an overwhelming feeling of unappreciation, complaints, and lack of support, from parents, colleagues and administrators" (Jackson, Personal Communications, 2020). She addressed her concerns about proceeding with this career but took one last leap of faith and catapulted from a public school setting to a charter school setting. "I had no idea what to expect from the teachers, staff, parents, or even myself in this new environment. With all of this being said and without sounding too overly dramatic, Savant was my lifeline" (Jackson, Personal Communications, 2020). Her words were heavy as she uttered her explanation for the reasons why she is



passionate about this school and its values. She stated that “it has changed my way of thinking about the African-American plight in our country and in our community. I have found a renewed sense of purpose and believe that I have been called to be a leader within this population and this community” (Jackson, Personal Communications, 2020). Her insight and portrayal of what this school means spoke louder than the overall administration, but the meaning and opportunities held with being able to instruct mostly African American young boys and girls. I share similar views and left our meeting neglecting my past emotions towards the school, and focused on the actual work the students and I have put in this year, the progress we have made, the growth we have undergone. It was a beautiful realization of how small negative experiences can overrule much larger positive ones, so I am glad I was able to share this conversation with her.

The next person I had the pleasure of interviewing was the principal, co-founder, and current third-grade teacher of the school, Ms. Richardson. Unfortunately due to the sudden closure of our site, we conducted our interview interpersonally through the face-to-face platform, Zoom. We began by talking about what this school meant to her and her response was wholesome and endearing but also business-oriented. Being that she, along with two others, were the backbones of creating this school, it was evident how much she cares about its success and describes the school as a “manifestation of a dream... the embodiment of lifelong learning...[and] a catalyst for excellence” (Richardson, Personal Communications, 2020). We continued our conversation towards her current roles in the school and how each has affected her positionality in and outside of the classroom working with students, parents, and staff. She remarked how this “dual role has allowed me to develop into a well-rounded principal and educator. As an administrator, it is very rare that a leader gets to feel what it is like to be on the other side of their bright ideas. There have been many times that I’ve had to scale back because

my goals may have been a bit ambitious, and, overall, I have been humbled” (Richardson, Personal Communications, 2020). As this segment began positive, I gaged that reflection of the past years was going through her mind as she finished off her thought with “I feel guilty for not being fully available to the needs of teachers and students. As an administrator, my number one priority should be my teachers, but as a teacher, my number one priority is my students. This toggle of allegiance can get challenging, but I am thankful for the grace that has been extended to me by both” (Richardson, Personal Communications, 2020). Interpreting this information sheds light on several occurrences throughout the year. I cannot imagine what challenges of being both an administrator and educator look like and there is no doubt that a great deal of stress comes along with it. Like my conversation with Mrs. Jackson, we spoke on her relationship with the community and what it means to be a school of predominately African American students. She communicated her vision is for the school is to be a “pillar in San Bernardino City” and seeks their reputation to be one of “high academic performance and excellence that can carry the legacy of academia in the Black community and be an example of the distinction in education” (Richardson, Personal Communications, 2020). Speaking with Ms. Richardson was informative. Working with her throughout the year she has presented herself to be a strong woman who is comfortable in her skin and does not take education lightly. She has a tough demeanor that is difficult to approach but will effortlessly help when help is needed. This conversation allowed me to see where her ideas originated from and most importantly learn a bit more about who she is as an individual outside of her administrative role.

Last to be interviewed was Mrs. Lambert. We conducted our meeting through the interface, Zoom, and eagerness was sent through the screen as the meeting began. Mrs. Lambert is the Direct of Operations and she beams joy and positivity daily. Every encounter I have with

Mrs. Lambert, whether it a casual conversation as I make copies in the office or just passing each other in the hallway, I always leave her presence feeling uplifted. There are people in this world that have that power and Mrs. Lambert is most definitely one of them. Her experience at this school held a different meaning than I anticipated. She shared her story of being a single African American parent raising her and having to witness the disparities African Americans and other children of color experience in their pursuit of education. She remarked how if her son did not have her to advocate for his education, then “he would have fallen through the cracks without anyone giving a care in the world. This was my turning point. My realization that if I am going to advocate for my son, then I will advocate for all children in the public education system” (Lambert, Personal Communications, 2020). Her passion to work within this school stemmed from personal experience and willed her to prevent those experiences from happening to other young African American boys and girls trying to find their place in an oppressive educational system. Her story influences her work at the school as well as she is responsible for creating support groups for parents to stay active in their child’s education, “I want to encourage the development of parent-based groups. These groups are responsible for recruiting parents in the activities of [our school] to strengthen the community” (Lambert, Personal Communications, 2020). Growing up within this city, Mrs. Lambert makes a connection to the community fluidly by boldly stating “I honestly believe that [this school] is what the community of San Bernardino needs and what will eventually put San Bernardino back on the map” (Lambert, Personal Communications, 2020). Her passion is captivating, and it informed me of her goals for this school but in large the community to which she serves and resides in. This interview gave insight that this school means more than just a successful business operation, but a vision for what the community can be.

### **Problematize the Issue**

After gathering the perspectives from prominent figures of this school, a new meaning of what this school stands for emerged. However, the practices instilled within the school walls do not align with the message that is being communicated. School-wide students must walk in uniformed lines as each body stands up straight, holds their hands behind their back with their eyes directly behind the person in front of them, and feet pointing forward as they hold a “bubble” in their mouth to ensure no talking is taking place. The rules enforced give no freedom to children or grant space for them to be comfortable nonetheless act like themselves when having to perform as a member of the military force walking to and from class. Even in class, student expectations are to get straight to work and remain quiet until asked to speak. There is no communication or relationship between the teacher and the student other than that the teacher is there to teach and the student is there to learn. I challenge this model entirely. How can a five-year-old, or any age for that matter, learn if they are not expressing what is going on in their head? How can I teach if I don’t know anything about my students as individuals? My instruction relies on my knowledge of the interests my students have and if I am not permitted to let them talk or engage in relationship-building activities, then how are we supposed to cultivate an environment that offers comfort and the freedom to be wrong and make mistakes? As my students and I began the year, we needed to learn how to operate under these school-wide norms but also mitigate and create our own classroom culture that felt safe. Together we have made these hidden curriculums visible and discussed why the administration wants us to walk in perfect lines or sit in SLANT. My students know that I do not hold them to those standards inside of the classroom, but act quickly if any administrative member visits our class.

Access to technology in my class is scarce. School-wide there are only enough laptops for three classrooms, so kindergarten rarely has the opportunity to use them unless they are taking their trimester data test. Also, supports for English Learners, gifted students, and students with special needs are nearly non-existent as most students at the school are Standard English Learners and follow trends of typical development. Subsequently, I have researched to ensure I am appropriately meeting the needs of these students and when necessary have and financially supported these accommodations.

#### **Section 4 – School Mission & Demographics**

##### **Demographics**

This school site is a Public Charter located in San Bernardino. The racial demographics are predominately African American, with 97% of students and staff identified as such. The remainder of the school includes those of Latinx and Caucasian ethnic backgrounds. There is roughly an equal split between the gender of students, but the staff is mainly made of up persons who identify as female. There is only one classified English Learner within the school grounds, but most students are Standard English Learners who speak African American Vernacular English. I believe that the city's overall demographics reflect that of this school, however, I question the lack of representation of Latinx students. Given that Latinx is the largest racial group in San Bernardino, I am taken aback by the school's data. This is not a proclaimed African American school, but I question if many, including staff, want to believe that it is. I have witnessed on several accounts comments and remarks made by staff members that this is a "Black school". These acclamations make me, as a staff member and adult, feel unwelcomed. I could only imagine how families outside of this racial identity may feel when touring the school and hearing vocalizations as such.

I also acknowledge that this school is still in its beginning phases. Due to the publication and advertisements that come from the founders and other first-year families, the most successful model of exposure is by word of mouth. This school obtains several families that are related to one another by the connection of cousins or siblings who have grade school-aged children. This, in turn, would cultivate a higher percentage of African American families admitting their children within this school. I hope that as time goes on, and more grade levels are offered, a greater representation of the city of San Bernardino is obtained. I do struggle to see how operations, or the mindset of staff members, would change with the notion that this is a Public Charter and not an acclaimed African American grade school.

### **Mission and Vision**

This school was developed and founded by three individuals in 2017. They had their first year in operation in 2018 as a kindergarten to second-grade elementary school and have grown by one grade level since then. The mission statement of the school is “designed to provide an enriched and innovative educational experience that is rooted in financial literacy and entrepreneurship. We aim to balance both experiential and academic learning to prepare children for the demands of the 21st century, equip students with skills necessary to compete globally, and ensure that scholars are both career, college, and business-ready” (Educational institute, 2020). This school’s hours of operation are 8 am to 4 pm Monday through Friday to accommodate the additional curriculum they have in place. Being a declared business school, they have adopted a financial literacy curriculum that is taught beginning in kindergarten and advances as the grade levels progress. Due to this addition, the school days are much longer than the average traditional school site but does not accommodate student needs as there is still only

given one recess and one lunch break and no naps for kindergarten and transitional kindergarten students.

The vision held is to become “well known as the Inland Empire’s most contemporary and innovative school of business for children... [to] produce scholars who are financially literate, passionate about their purpose, and positioned to become entrepreneurial leaders in the community” (educational institute, 2020). As I reread this statement, it comes across with the motive to achieve and produce business-minded students. It is very structured in that there is no room for other trades or professions to be cultivated within their walls. Though to be financially literate is an area that all students should be exposed to, it should not harness their abilities or desires to become something other than an entrepreneur. However, being in this community and working with lower socioeconomic classes, this is a major selling point for many families. As a parent who struggles financially, they may find this aspect essential for their child to better their future adult lives.

Though I find value in instructing financial literacy to my kindergarteners, it is not a focal point in our classroom culture. Our days consist of identifying wants versus needs, supply and demand, and consumers versus producers. We create interactive scenario-based problems and use dramatic play to delve deeper into these concepts. Though I do enjoy teaching this, I never place a priority or higher rank towards this subject, nor imply that it is what they should be aspiring to be. Each day I greet them at the door with a handshake, high-five, or a hug and call them by the job they want to be when they grow up. I do not stress that their career must be in the business realm, and instead harness on their creativity and individual aspirations.

### **Problematize the Issue**

The idea of abolitionist teaching comes to mind when thinking of the message the school is giving off. Abolitionist teaching stems from the idea of fighting for change to occur to offer more opportunity and success of people of color in a historically White educational environment (Love, 2019). However, this fight can look different in every situation. For that of this school site, with African American funders who were raised in San Bernardino, and have faced the effects of societal oppression, I believe that their efforts to diminish and restructure a system of injustices have resulted in “White Rage” (Love, p. 91, 2020). Their attempts are shot back by higher powers that ultimately have the larger say in how education is run. For this reason, this school has developed a subtractive version of how a school with its demographics should run due to data that proclaims the lower success rate of African American students. They have harnessed militaristic operations to structure their students in a very strict manner. They hope to guide and prepare these students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but, are cultivating learning in a harmful way. In an attempt to gain a stronger representation of scholarly students, they are stripping them of their individuality which in turn is only preparing them to live within the current boundaries this society has brought on. Instead of fighting the system to encourage a true representation of African American students, they are molding their population to look and act a certain way to fit within the oppressive guidelines. In effect, all this does is cater to the oppressive injustices that this system has created. In conclusion, I have devised that their initial approach and want for their students’ success is genuine but their actions are clouded by “White rage”. What can be an approach to abolitionist teaching of working with students to surpass the injustices they are facing, requires a shift in focusing on each students’ individual opportunity outside of the classroom. (Love, p. 90, 2020).

### **Section 5 – Class Reflection**



## **Ecology**

My classroom ecology was created based on the personalities of myself and students. Going into this year, I had high hopes of how easy it will be to co-create a warm and welcoming environment within our space. However, I quickly learned that with this age group, came many “firsts” for a lot of them. More often than not I found myself using negative based language to address behavior such as, “don’t climb on the table”, “don’t lean back in your chair”, or “don’t call out”. It was overwhelmingly difficult to create a safe environment when so many of my students were testing their boundaries and adapting to this new environment. Eventually, I began the process of reasoning. Instead of using negative based language, I began holding Circles to talk about these expectations. As a class, we would discuss the reasoning behind raising their hands or walking in the classroom. Together, we were able to provide context which in turn supported positive behavior reinforcement and acknowledgment from students. They began helping each other throughout the day, as I would hear them affirm each other with gentle reminders of why we have certain norms in place. In taking this approach, our relationship as a class deepened. We became more aware of each other’s feelings and how our actions affect those around us. I found that by holding these Circles, students’ patience grew with one another as they began to compromise their wants to best support the entire class.

I reflect heavily on this because I was naïve to think that any class would so easily be able to adapt and create an environment in a short time. My expectations were unrealistic before this experience. Now looking back, I realize that cultivating our classroom ecology is an ongoing process. It does not just happen in the beginning and is carried out for the rest of the school year. It begins on the first day but evolves as students mature and grow. Towards the end of the school year, students and I had a deep conversation about posture when learning. Five-year-olds were

able to reason with me why the way they sit should not matter if they are not distracting themselves or others around them. This was one of my favorite conversations because they took a school-wide expectation, SLANT, challenged it, and made alterations to it. We were open and honest, and together we enhanced our way of learning. As amazing as this conversation was, I do not believe that I could have had it with them at the beginning of the year, nor would I expect them to. Together, we learn, we adapt, and with that, our classroom culture strengthens.

### **Demographics**

My class is made up of 25 students. Four students from my original roster left the school due to moving situations or transportation issues. In their place, I gained four new students who started at various times throughout the school year. The demographics of my class are majority African American. I have one student who identifies as Latino and is classified as an Initial Fluent English Proficient learner. Another linguistic classification found in my class is the high percentage of Standard English Learners, as most of my students speak African American vernacular English. To accommodate this need, I rely heavily on visual aids and graphic organizers that aid in preventing miscommunications that may occur through the teaching of the White oriented curriculum. We also partake in dramatic play to deepen the understandings of concepts and vocabulary.

I have a combination of Transitional and regular Kindergarten students aged four to six years old. Of this group, our class has a higher percentage of boys than girls which offers a more rambunctious atmosphere filled with Sonic the Hedgehog and Power Ranger references. To meet the needs of our class demographics, are lessons highly incorporate movement and interactive strategies across all content subjects. This approach keeps students' brains active while also granting the ability to keep the body moving. Incorporating art and physical education into more

prioritized subjects allows students to be creative through the learning process and not have to neglect or try to ignore all of the energy their bodies are naturally producing.

### **Problematize the Issue**

Our classroom is equipped with plenty of writing utensils, paper, and tools. We have a curriculum for each subject we cover and are given materials to support these lessons. What we lack is parental involvement in the classroom and one-to-one technology. My students all have working parents that are occupied during school hours. Many parents vocalize how they enrolled their child at this school simply because its hours of operation accommodate their work hours. This lessens the economic burden of hiring childcare for after school hours while the parents are at work. To this end, parents are fully occupied with their jobs to have time to volunteer in the classroom. Another aspect that our class does not have access to is the use of student technology. Unfortunately, due to the school's growth and economic standing, kindergarten and half of the first-grade does not have access to a classroom set of Chromebooks that the other classes have. However, if there is a justified activity that I want my students to participate in, I can request access to the laptops, and accommodations can be made.

Despite these allegations, they do not hold students back from developing 21<sup>st</sup>-century characteristics that will aid in their future careers. Students are harnessing their creativity, communication, and teamwork every school day, and relating these techniques to their everyday lives. Connecting traits that may be associated with school and normalizing them as a notion that they carry this toolbox with them wherever they go is valuable and outweighs reliable access to technology at this point in their academic careers. Each day we enter the classroom, we are focused and excited to grow and become one step closer to becoming the best versions of ourselves.



### **Part D: Reflection of a Critical Social Justice Educator**

Before beginning this section, I want to acknowledge that I am writing with a joyous mindset. This year has been the most pivotal year I have yet to experience. I have grown and developed into a person who has the clarity of who she is but is hungry to continue to learn more. I have challenged my educational muscles as a scholar to do the research, apply what I have learned, and go back and fix what may not have worked. What swells me with the most pride, however, is that after this year, I feel confident in labeling myself as an educator. The peaks and troughs that I experienced throughout this year are of some that will forever stay with me. I am overjoyed writing this final section, but I am also overwhelmed with pride and emotion. It is difficult to say that this chapter of my life is over, but where it has left me is a place that seeks more. More information, more research, more desire to create change. I have grown into the role of being a socially and critically just educator who has committed to take on the beautiful challenge of bringing equity into the classroom. If this last year has taught me anything, it is that this is my calling. I have experienced its highs and lows, yet I am left eager to experience more. Here is where my journey begins.

#### **I. Classroom Ecology and Teacher Presence**

Classroom ecology and teacher presence; the competency domain that I felt most comfortable with as I began my journey of expedited learning. I believe that I felt most comfortable with this domain because it incorporated a lot of what I already knew.

##### **Stand One - Establishing a Baseline of Respect for Students and Their Learning**

Strand one is a clear example that showcases my comfort in performing these competencies as it encompassed mostly emerging skills such as speaking clearly and audibly and

using students' names. Looking back, there is no noticeable growth shown on my formal competency evaluation, but I believe this is because I came in already feeling confident in these abilities. However, as the school year progressed, I became cognizant of the "why". Before teaching this year, I would use students' names and dress professionally regularly; this of course never changed. What did change was my acknowledgment and discovery of how these strands aided in creating an inclusive, warm, and safe environment my students wanted to be a part of. This was my first classroom. The first time I had been labeled as the teacher of record. The first time I had the opportunity to grow alongside my students and create a classroom ecology that benefited in all our growth. I understand now the importance of using students' names. It is more than a way to show students you remember or acknowledge them, but how a teacher begins building reputable relationships with students and proving to them you care. This significance is clear to me now, and I look to these strands as some of the most important of the bunch.

### **Strand Two- Setting and Demonstrating Expectations**

Setting and demonstrating expectations is another strand that I do not show explicit formal growth due to my initial comfortability with these competencies, but I have cultivated a deeper understanding of why these competencies hold importance. My year of experience was in teaching kindergarten which in my eyes could not have been more suitable. I related so much to my students in that we were both learning new things every day, and many of these competencies supported us in doing this. Strand two helped strengthen our classroom ecology by granting a voice of reason behind the expectations held school-wide and within our room. There is something special about asking and receiving valid explanations from five-year-olds for why running in the classroom or climbing on top of the furniture may not be something we want to

exhibit. I learned that my voice was not the one that carried the most importance, and to listen to what my students have to say first before putting in words in their heads. I learned that yes, five-year-olds are more than capable of reasoning and creating norms for how they want their class to be, and together we were able to support one another in upholding our expectations.

### **Strand Three - Supporting Productive Learning with Culturally Sustaining Practices**

Strand three is one that I felt substantial growth in. This area of competencies supported me with my work alongside all three of my Focus Students. They, as well as other students, taught me the importance of reinforcing positive behavior (3.1), providing multiple opportunities for success in the classroom (3.4), and validating and incorporating students' skills within lessons (3.7). Above all, I learned that to teach my students, I needed to know them and learn about their experiences. Teaching in San Bernardino County, most of my students have experienced substantial events that may have provoked trauma but have also developed skills and strengths that needed to be harnessed in the classroom. For example, Focus Student Three presented multiple behavioral outbursts throughout the year, but he is also an excellent leader. His communication skills are outstanding, so incorporating opportunities to share amongst his peers was an avenue that was frequently held in our lessons. Focus Student One is an Emergent Bilingual. Though not labeled as an English Learner, she is fluent in Spanish and benefited from English Language Development supports. However, this label did not account for her incredible collaboration skills. Working within teams and having opportunities to work with peers allowed this student to soar. My point is that all students hold several labels. Their race, their socioeconomic class, their gender, their religion, their culture, all played significant roles in

building our classroom ecology (August, Shanahan, & Escamilla, 2009). Providing choice through multiple opportunities to be successful during lessons catered to my students' strengths but also allowed them to feel comfortable and willing to take risks in areas they felt less confident in. After this year of working closely with my students, I became familiar with this concept of intersectionality. There are so many factors that go into each student's learning experience and it makes me think about how and why I designed my lessons the way I did this past year. There were several identities that I considered with each lesson I planned out, but I neglected many others. Moving forward, I commit to culturally responsive teaching through a wider lens that incorporates and acknowledges all identities my students hold (Jimenez-Castellanos 2017). I strive to learn and grow with my students and to best meet their needs, I need to be open, honest, and vulnerable with who I am so that we can grow together.

#### **Strand Four - Using Knowledge of Students to Anticipate and Limit Unproductive Behaviors**

Strand four houses competency 4.3, managing and designating time to maximize learning. Though I feel like I learned about my students, it was still difficult for me to predict how a lesson would realistically pan out. For example, some behaviors were predictable, and I would incorporate scaffolds to support these students, but as a lesson would begin to unfold, other distractions would arise that were not anticipated. This ultimately took away from learning time. Though I do believe I have grown in being able to address unplanned distractions promptly, going into next year, I hope to increase my efficiency to best maximize the learning taking place within my classroom. I will continue to focus students' attention in culturally



responsive ways to best manage and designate time to maximize my students' engagement in learning.

### **Strand Five - Harnessing Instructional Cohesion and Intensity**

Harnessing instructional cohesion and intensity is a strand that I saw myself grow tremendously. I would describe myself as an animated and expressive person by nature, but as I became more confident in the classroom, so did my persona. Competencies 5.1 and 5.8 put meaning towards how I feel while teaching. I displayed genuine enthusiasm and I believe that this excitement transferred over to my students. Working with Focus Student One especially, allowed me to see the value in body language, facial expressions, and vocal fluctuations to aid in her comprehension of academic vocabulary. I also saw the benefit of teaching with expression from the reactions of my students. Displaying pure excitement was reflected in how they then viewed the lesson. I will be the first to admit that not every objective is going to be the most exciting thing, but when this positive demeanor is paired with any content, my students and I were able to find joy in the learning.

With my class, my approach to harness instructional cohesion paired well with my intensity and enthusiasm. Throughout each lesson, providing clarity through multiple checks for understanding was implemented to make our learning goals accessible and more easily transferable to my students' learning needs (Zwiers, 2017). Going into next year, I want to continue to provide my students with these checks for understanding but incorporate them more frequently. This will allow my students to embrace the content and promote critical thought and application to their lives and community.

## **II. Content Knowledge to Promote Access, Learning, and Achievement**

The second domain is one that solidified my becoming of an educator. It focusses on the concrete detail of curriculum and state standards and how to best relay that information to meet students' learning needs.

### **Developing facility with the curriculum**

Strand one within this domain brings forth a competency that allowed me to self-reflect throughout my first year of teaching. Competency 1.3, select developmentally appropriate curriculum (or approaches to it) and instructional practices based on knowledge of and relationships with students, played a major role in my growth. Working within my school's administration, I was prompted in several ways which ordered me to fit a certain mold and teach within those boundaries. Being so new to this career, I took any lead that I could follow and adapted many of the teaching practices I was told to administer. I followed the curriculum step by step and rarely took any risks in expanding my lesson plans. I did this for multiple reasons, one being that I was naïve and had yet to learn how to effectively create differentiated lessons for my students, but also because I held an At-Will employment position that made it clear my placement could be terminated at any point throughout the year. With this mindset, I adhered to any instruction my administration gave without hesitation. This in turn did not permeate actionable growth towards creating the proper approaches to the curriculum that would benefit my students most. It was not until the holiday season when I began tapping into my creative energy. From this moment on, I began using my curriculum not as my holy grail but as a tool; a tool that aided in much more robust and effective lessons. I began adding, substituting, or at times only referencing for a foundation of what my lesson could look like. I feel most proud of

this area of growth because I broke out of my shell, grew confident in my abilities, and allowed myself to grow in a direction that I believed would benefit my students most.

### **Aligning curriculum and instruction with measurable goals**

The second strand within this domain was one that I felt comfortable with from the beginning as I relied heavily on my curriculum to ensure that I was hitting all the Kindergarten State Standards. I collected weekly data to ensure learning goals were being met, but would also administer quarterly check-ins with my students. This was a one-on-one meeting to gain a deeper understanding of where they were in the learning process and how I could further align the curriculum to meet their learning needs. As the year progressed, I began implementing student self-assessment strategies to provide contextual evidence for my students to see their growth. They began using this information to set goals for themselves before the end of the following quarter. This strategy helped many of my students, especially Focus Student Three, who felt most confident when he was in the know and in control of his learning. This was an opportunity for all of my students to take ownership of their progress throughout the year and add meaning to our daily lessons.

### **III. Instructional Practices to Promote Learning and Engagement**

Domain three, instructional practices to promote learning and engagement, is the domain I believe to have shown the most growth in. There are several competencies within this domain that I feel confident with, but there are also some that show a need for deeper learning and continued development.

#### **Making productive learning accessible**

The first strand within this domain offered me many insights into my professional and personal growth as an educator. I label myself as a perfectionist and stepping into my first year of teaching, I was feeling overwhelmed and feared not being able to be the teacher my students deserved. To prevent this, I over-planned my lessons and ensured every aspect and expectation was being met. As the weeks went on, my responsibilities began to magnify, and signs of stress became physically evident. Explained by Ellen Moir from the Wisconsin Education Association Council 2020, there are four phases that first-year teachers experience throughout the year, and in November, I fell into the phase of disillusionment. The weeks of strenuous planning on top of my graduate studies, first formal evaluation from my school site, and parent-teacher conferences all began bleeding into one large, never-ending, stress-induced feeling I was unable to escape. Though this is a time that I never wish to relive, I experienced the most eye-opening moment that changed the way I would prepare my lessons moving forward. Competency 1.3, provide a rationale for instruction, was an area I would stay up thinking about before delivering each lesson. I wanted to make my lessons relevant and meaningful to my students so I would muster up connections and present them to my students after I delivered that lesson's objective. One day in November, when I was not in my finest headspace, I did not prepare my lessons to the extent that I normally had, and I forgot to think of a rationale for a math lesson I had already begun. After I delivered the objective, I remember thinking to myself how I needed to think of some sort of connection quickly before my students notice my lack of preparation, but I fell short. I was unable to think of something so I panicked and voiced to my class, "why do you think we need to learn this?" Assuming I would receive blank stares, I was already hoping to use that wait time as an opportunity for me to think of a connection, but to my surprise, I did not receive blank stares. Instead, all I saw was a sea of hands held high in the air. As I began calling on students, their

ideas filled the air which fueled further responses and deeper connections made by the culmination of the class. At first, I was in shock by the plethora of responses and how amazing my students' connections were, but more so angry with myself for never asking for my students' insight before. Why did I feel that I was the only one in the room who could connect an academic concept with something applicable to my students' lives outside of the classroom? This was the moment I recognized my students for the experts they are. From that moment forward, I never delivered a rationale without consulting their opinions first, and more times than not, they always had one to give.

### **Using instructional practices to grow students' knowledge, skills, and understanding**

Within this strand are several areas that I seek further development in. I first would like to begin by acknowledging the confidence I found while performing think alouds (2.6). Beginning this year, I felt awkward and to be honest, unsure, of what a think-aloud looked and sounded like. As I gained further insight, I grew comfort in practicing this skill and believe I grew to the point where they became natural and fun additions to lessons. Though I recognize this growth, I am at the place where I feel my understanding may only equate to the age group I served. Assuming that I might not forever be a kindergarten teacher, tells me that I need more practice and grow a greater sense of comfort while performing think alouds to older age groups.

Another area of growth that I would like to highlight is competency 2.8, implementing structured group work. This was a challenge for me this year due to the physical logistics of my classroom. My group of 25 students was seated around four tables; creating groups of six to seven to one table. For this reason, I favored partner work because it seemed easier to meet collaborative expectations. As the year progressed, I realized that students did not need to physically work at a table to harness collaboration. I began grouping my students in smaller

teams of three to four and opened the classroom up for students to select where they worked with their teams. Though my classroom space was not robust, students were excited to select their working space and always made do with the space they had. To continue my growth in this area, I want to challenge myself to go outside of my comfort zone more often and allow my students to be the ones to tell me if an idea such as sitting on the floor is too outrageous. I also have the goal of incorporating Project Based Learning into my teaching strategy. This in turn will naturally promote small group work and push my students to “master academic skills and content knowledge, develop skills necessary for future success, and build the personal agency needed to tackle life’s and the world’s challenges” (HQPBL, 2018).

#### **IV. Assessments to Inform Instruction and Promote Learning**

The fourth domain revolves around assessment to inform both the teacher and student where they are in the learning cycle. My growth in this domain reflects my knowledge of the different types of assessments there are. From real-time checks for understanding to formal assessments, every opportunity to gauge how my students were interpreting the content played a crucial role in my overall growth as an educator.

##### **Identifying and meeting students where they were academically and socio-emotionally**

Within strand one, I feel that my greatest form of growth was with competency 1.4, help students develop meaningful and productive self-assessment strategies. Within this past year, I focused on teaching with the mind, body, and spirit heavily present. Implementing self-assessments allowed my students to grow comfortable within the learning cycle. We practiced how it feels to make mistakes but allow ourselves to learn from them in a positive light. Having

my students acknowledge and identify their own mistakes or uncertainty within a segment was such pivotal growth as it developed their self-awareness and self-management skills; two of the five core competencies of social-emotional learning (CASEL, 2020). It was through assessment that my students were able to engage with the work in a meaningful way rather than simply absorbing and regurgitating content to “get an A”.

### **Using assessments strategically**

The school site that I served centered around the collection of data and utilizing that data to best serve their students. However, I will admit that the analysis of my students’ data was not acted upon until I began changing the way my assessments looked. When I first began, I adapted the format my school site operated around which were strictly pencil to paper exams that tested whether or not the student was able to memorize that week’s content. As I began learning and building relationships with my students, I acquired the knowledge needed to create proper assessments that would act on their strengths and build on their areas of growth. With Focus Student One and Two, I needed to understand that language development takes many forms and progresses at different rates. With this in mind, I committed to providing diverse and accessible formal assessments to benefit all of my learners, especially with my emergent bilingual (Alvarez, 2014). What this entailed was providing students with multiple options to showcase their knowledge to me. The pencil paper format was no longer highlighted and what I noticed was not only higher success rates of my students’ overall achievement, but our environment both physically and mentally became less confined. Offering multiple ways of assessment allowed my students to feel as if they were not taking a test and instead were enjoying their time communicating to me what they were able to retain. Now, assessment excites me. Where before, I looked at it as something we needed to do. I am proud of this growth because I feel that I was

not set up for success in this field due to the regulations and expectations my school site has in place. I strive to continue down this road and leave pencil to paper tests as a thing of the past to maximize my students' knowledge and retention of subject content.

## **V. Social Justice Dispositions to Promote Access, Learning, Achievement, and Future Opportunity and Success**

Domain five was my favorite domain to work within. I challenged myself as each day brought new light to my positionality. Working with 24 Black students opened my eyes to the privileges I have and how my students view me. This is the domain that sparked the most personal growth as began learning exactly who Stephanie Yvonne Gatica is.

### **Growing self-awareness**

Positionality is, "how one is situated through the intersection of power and the politics of gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, culture, language, and other social factors" (Villaverde, 2008 as cited in Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003 p. 519). Strand one of this domain allowed me to focus in on who I am and whose opinions of me mattered most. My students, their parents, their community, all looked different from where I am from. I am a Latina with many privileges I had yet to acknowledge before working within San Bernardino County and at my school site especially. I sought feedback from my students and their families regularly, but I know that I am still learning about myself and am encouraged to continue down this path of pinpointing my positionality throughout my educational and professional career.

### **Raising consciousness**

Strand two of this domain highlighted making hidden curriculum explicit and avoiding assumptions, but it also shined a light on learning who your students are outside of the



classroom. This was one of my most favorite strands because it helped me learn and build relationships with my students and further cultivate a social-emotional based learning environment. One example that I began implementing halfway through the year was greeting my students at the door by the name of what they wanted to be when they grew up. This small action gave my students a smile and a little boost of energy before starting our academic day.

### **Sharing power and tools**

Lastly, sharing power and tools is a strand that I am still learning about but have grown substantially within. I have two core moments that occurred this year that I felt most challenged to learn from. Black History Month and the death of George Floyd. As February rolled around, my school site celebrated Black history in many ways, and educating my students on Black heroes was central. What I failed to recognize was how I would need to explicitly talk about the oppression of Black culture throughout the years through concepts such as slavery. I will never forget the day I realized my students did not know what this word meant and as I began to explain its meaning, my positionality rang loudly in my mind and I could not help but recognize the demographic of my students as I swelled with tears. It hit me so hard that I needed to hold a Circle to communicate why I became emotional. My students and I grew so much that day as we were able to label and recognize Black history but also where we stood that day, as a unit. Our journey of recognizing power did not end there. About two months after transitioning into online learning, the death of George Floyd occurred. I knew that as soon as I opened the Zoom call, all academic plans for that day would be secondary. We held a virtual Circle, and the raw emotions and insight my students poured out, left me in tears. This experience taught me so much. I felt angry, sad, and frustrated that my babies have to experience a world that does not recognize their intelligence before their skin color. Does not see their compassion before their skin color. Does

not see who they are as individuals before seeing their skin color. Competencies 3.3. and 3.4 of maintaining a socio-emotionally appropriate and empowering classroom culture and preparing students to be successful in light of the forms of oppression they might encounter highlight two of the most meaningful aspects that I learned from this academic school year.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this school year and work with Claremont Graduate University these past fourteen months, I have made many mistakes but have grown into a better individual because of them. I have learned what it means to be a critical social justice educator not by reading a definition in a book, but from the experiences and knowledge that I acquired working firsthand with my class of Black and Latinx students. What this year has taught me is beyond words but a lifestyle that I have fully embraced. This may be the end of a chapter, but it is not the end of my story. I look forward to the many more mistakes that I will make throughout this journey as I know they will lead to personal and professional growth. Cheers to changing the world, one classroom at a time.

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